CAUGHT!

HOMER CROY

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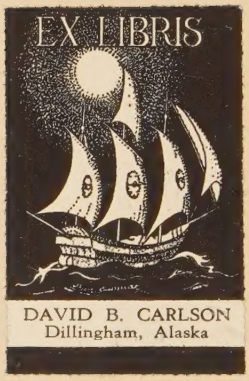

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A NOVEL BY

HOMER CROY

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"West of the Water Tower"
"They Had to See Paris"
Etc.

Harper & Brothers Publishers
New York and London
1928

CAUGHT!
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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.
FIRST EDITION
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CAUGHT!

Chapter One

CONNIE WEBB put away the ironing-board in the closet behind the door and glanced at the clock. Almost five. In a few minutes it would be time to get out the car and go downtown to meet her husband at the courthouse where he worked.

She held up approvingly her husband's Palm Beach suit, which she had just pressed. It was a difficult task to dip it in ammonia water, sponge it neatly, and press it. Many women in Junction City would have told their husbands to send their suits to the tailor, or would have let their husbands wear limp, depressed-looking clothes, but Connie had done the work cheerfully. She liked to do things for Walter, little surprises. Tonight at the Country Club she wanted him to look his best.

It was the annual dinner, at which a new member was to be elected to the board of directors. The directors would march into the committee room, there would be a rumble of voices behind the door, and then after a time they would march back again and the name of the new director would be announced. It would be Walter, her husband. Walter, a member of the board of directors of the Country Club! And only thirty years old! It was indeed an honor. Most of the directors were elderly men, with white

hair, or none at all—how young Walter would look among them! It was only another step up for him. Some day he would be—her mind raced away pleasantly. Although everybody knew in advance who the new director was to be, there would be a burst of applause and the merry cry of: "Speech! Speech!"

And then Walter would stand up and, with the grinning boyishness so attractive to her, would deliver his impromptu speech. They had worked hard on it. Last night, in the bedroom, she had rehearsed him as he stood behind a chair assuring an imaginary audience that he would endeavor to do his best to achieve the high goal that his able predecessors had set before him. The speech was rather good—and she was pleased that she had been able to contribute something to it.

There was to be a program, when she would sing. She could see herself as she stood beside the piano; how desperately she would tremble; her eye would catch Walter's, he would smile an assurance; a moment later she would hear herself singing the first note, and then mysteriously her trembling would vanish. There would be applause as she finished, and then again her eye would seek Walter's. What a splendid evening of triumph it would be for them—Walter, the new member of the board of directors, she taking a leading part in the program!

Connie knew that many husbands in Junction City would have taken the hard work of pressing the suit as a matter of course—at best, merely give a grunt of approval. But not Walter! He was still appreciа-

tive of little things. It was one of the fine things about him, one of the qualities which made Connie love him. Sometimes she thought, secretly, he was too good for her; then she would shut the thought away hastily.

They had been married seven years and Connie was now twenty-eight. No one ever called Connie beautiful, but she had wholesome good looks which were very pleasing indeed. She was tall and had brown hair and blue eyes and a pleasant merry laugh which made one overlook the lack of perfection in facial conformation which goes to make beauty. Added to her tall, graceful figure was the ability to wear her clothes well. As old Mrs. Hooper, one of the neighbors, said, "Connie Webb always looked like somebody." Indeed, Connie and Walter were one of the attractive, well-appearing couples of the town.

"And they always go out together," people said. Many of the young couples in Junction City got along quite well without this formality.

Although Walter was not brilliant, he was, as Junction City said, steady. He had that mysterious and subtle thing known as "character." Other young men in Junction City had, now and then, small "affairs" on the side. The Country Club—irreproachable as it looked on the occasion of a "function"—had its whispering gallery, but Walter had never been, and never would be, a party to an "affair." He was pleasant and cordial to everyone, and it would never enter even the fringe of his consciousness to do anything unworthy of himself. And he expected strict fidelity

in return. Narrow and depressing as it was at times, Connie admired this Puritanical streak which ran through him. Often she thought of him as the product of two rocks—Gibraltar and Plymouth.

Connie carried the immaculate suit upstairs as though it were a basket of eggs, fished out a hanger, adjusted the suit on it, and then put it on Walter's side of the closet. It would be a nice little surprise for him when he found it. She could almost hear his voice as he called out:

"Say, Connie, that's fine. You sure fixed up my suit dandy. Here's your reward."

Then he would put his arm around her and kiss her. Many men might neglect like demonstrations of appreciation, but such carelessness was not a part of Walter's nature.

As Connie stood dressing before the long pier glass in the closet door, the house shook slightly, and she knew that all was well. The twins had come in. Twins! hers! the most wonderful, darling, precious human beings in the world, even though the neighbors grew frosty now and then. Especially on Sundays. The twins always seemed to be worse on Sundays.

"Mamma, mamma!" they called, and when she answered they started up the stairs with the noise that once she had associated with a cavalry troop. But such wholesome, genial, lovely noise.

Allen bounded in like an antelope. It seemed strange to her that people—even the neighbors—couldn't tell them apart, when to her they were full of expressions, glances, and intonations which made

them as unlike as a sunflower and a rose. Five years old—the most attractive age. She had said the same thing of them when she came back from the hospital. But each year, each day, they seemed to grow more wonderful.

Behind Allen came Albert, riding on a camel (Albert had had a camel all week), and now they swarmed around her and the room was full of joyful noise. What lovely romps the four of them had in the room—especially when daddy would be a circus horse and take them both pig-a-back (as Allen called it) at the same time. The twins had just had a most thrilling time. Allen, able for the moment to raise his voice the louder, had shot a couple of Indians and had barely escaped with his life from a bear, which had climbed to the top of the tree in the back yard after him, but he had thrown some pepper (which he happened to have in his pocket) in the bear's face and the big ol' bear had sneezed and sneezed till he had tumbled out of the tree. After killing the bear, Allen, on his invisible steed (which happened to be tied to the garage door), had galloped right up the stairs "to you, mamma." And then Albert, pushing himself into the conversation, told what he himself had done. The carnage had been terrific. Then he had come galloping home with gran'ma on his camel, named Harry.

Connie listened to the marvelous tales closely enough to say "Yes" and "No" at the right places, while she thought how richly blessed she and Walter were. A home of their own, two of the most wonderful chil-

dren in the world, Walter, climbing steadily ahead; the respect of the town.

"I suppose we ought to think ourselves very fortunate indeed," she thought. "And turn aroundie and mamma will button this little buttonie like *this*."

Mrs. Webb, Walter's mother, came up the stairs, following the children. Two years before, when Walter's father died, Walter's mother had come to live with Connie and Walter. Although his mother was a great help with the children, Connie wished that she and Walter could live alone. Still, his mother must have a home, she had to live somewhere, and Connie had quietly acquiesced. Not by the slightest intimation had she breathed to Walter that she would have preferred some other arrangement. It was what Walter wanted; nothing else counted.

An outstanding factor in the life of Mrs. Webb, senior, was "what people thought." Much of this feeling was due to the fact that Walter's mother had lived in Junction City all her life; she knew little of the world outside, and the weight of the town was strong upon her. All her life she had worried about little things, about what people would think and that other more terrible ogre, what they might say.

Mrs. Webb came into the big double room where Connie was finishing dressing. She was a rather small woman, with a quiet, mouse-like voice, and there was about her always a faintly complaining manner. Connie sometimes wished that she were more open in her accusations, instead of the indirect way she had of showing her anxiety over what people thought.

"I see you've got some of the bedclothes out on the balcony, airing," she commented, mildly. "I could see them quite plainly from the street. People are going to notice it."

Connie had taken advantage of the afternoon sun on the balcony to take the children's bedclothes out, but instead of spreading them on the railing where they could be seen from the street, she had carried out chairs and spread the clothes over them so that they were scarcely noticeable from the street. But they had caught Mrs. Webb's sharp eyes.

"I think I'll just bring the things in from the balcony," she said. "Somebody might pass by and see them."

Connie heard Mrs. Webb as she gathered up the clothes, the scrape of a chair, then the bang of the screen door as she fetched them in.

"Now it'll look better," said Mrs. Webb.

"Did you have a nice walk?" asked Connie.

"Oh yes, it was all right," sighed Mrs. Webb as she sat down, "but the boys made too much noise on the street. I saw several people looking at them."

Connie, having finished dressing, put on her hat.

"I'll start now, mother," she said. "When I get there, it'll be just about the right time."

Mrs. Webb's face brightened—it always did when she spoke of Walter.

"Two or three people stopped me on the street and congratulated me on Walter being elected to the board of governors—that is," she corrected, "practically elected. But while Mrs. Givens was talking to me,

Albert kept interrupting the lady." She raised her voice slightly. "The lady didn't think it was very nice, I'm sure she didn't." Mrs. Webb gave a reproving glance in the right direction.

Still looking at Albert, she continued speaking to Connie. It was only after Mrs. Webb had finished the sentence that Connie could tell that the speech was meant for her.

"I noticed, too, that one of the blinds was a bit higher than the other," she said, and then, going over to the window, Mrs. Webb carefully pulled it down to a level with the other. "Such things are so easily seen," she finished.

Of course, after Walter's election and the new prominence which would come to him, they would have to be more careful than ever about little things, Mrs. Webb said. Connie had heard the story many times before, in a slightly different dress, and now she said, briskly:

"I'll be back just as soon as I can. I don't expect to see anybody at all—just Walter and then right back. Don't you think the suit looks nice?"

She held out the work of perfection.

"I see you ironed over one of the buttons. It always makes a shiny place. Everybody'll be looking at him tonight, you know."

Connie gave a glance at the pleasant reflection of herself in the mirror and started down the steps, pursued by the cavalry.

"Good-by, darlings," she said as she flung her arms around them. "I'm going after daddy."

"Can't we go too, mamma?" they shouted, as if talking to somebody in the Arlington Addition. She looked at them again; they were presentable—for them—although not immaculate.

"Why, I guess so," said Connie. "All right. Hop in."

"I don't think I would," said Mrs. Webb in her faintly complaining voice. "There would be sure to be somebody see them at the courthouse. People notice twins more than they do other children."

Going out, after she had quieted the disappointed boys, Connie got into the neat, well-kept car which Walter was able to afford and started to back it along the two narrow strips of cement which ran out to the street, while Mrs. Webb stood on the porch watching her.

"You got off on one side," came Mrs. Webb's protest. "It hurts the grass."

In a moment, as the car sped through the pleasant afternoon air, Connie had forgotten Walter's mother. After all, Connie reflected, the world was pretty good to her. Usually she felt this way, except, now and then, when fits of depression held her in their gnarled and terrible hands. But always she tried to keep Walter from seeing her in these sloughs. These depressions were due, she thought, to a bad night's rest, or to some passing anxiety in regard to the twins, or even to the prosaic and plebian matter of eating too much . . . or were they?

As she approached the downtown section, the houses began to give way to stores; first, brightly colored

filling stations, then commission houses where eggs and butter were bought and shipped to the cities; farther on the better class two-story brick buildings in which were general stores, with doctors' and dentists' and real-estate offices and photograph galleries on the second floors. As she continued to spin along, the Square opened suddenly and she experienced the feeling she had had in watching a travel motion picture. It was of sitting still, with the streets and people flitting by, as one came into a town, and then suddenly some unexpected open space would be before her. And so here, before her, was the Square. Cars were threading in and out; a team of horses clumped past; a farmer went by with a calf standing up in his wagon, its glassy eyes staring at the strange sights. The farmer, browned and sun-beaten, with deep creases in his neck, threw up his hand in friendly greeting to another farmer, and drove on. There was a sound as though the fire department were coming down the street, as one lone boy, with his hand on an ear-splitting squawker, got off his bicycle, turned one pedal at the proper angle, stood the bicycle against the curb, and then bounded into an ice-cream parlor. Heaven was ahead. It was, in all, such a scene as Connie had witnessed many times—the daily round of a small town; and Connie liked it. There was a wholesomeness about it that appealed to her, and again a feeling of contentment and assurance swam over her.

She guided the car between the white slanting parallel lines used to mark off the parking space, and started across the street toward the courthouse. She

went quickly and lightly up the steps and then along the high, resounding hall to a door marked "County Recorder." Here a record of the deeds and the real-estate transfers was kept. Recorder was one of the important offices of the county, the highest the county could bestow upon a person except that of judge. Walter was a deputy county recorder and was making a name for himself. Soon he would be proposed for the position of recorder itself. Connie rejoiced in the success that simple, hard-working Walter had attained. She like to see the respect paid him by men much older, the obliging yet business-like air with which he transacted the business which came up in his office. A slip on Walter's part might mean that a deed to some hard-working farmer's land would be worthless, or at least throw it into the legal barb wire of court; but Walter never made such slips. And tonight at the Country Club he would be rewarded with another mark of merit.

Connie entered the large room with its high ceiling. In the corner was a steel safe for the keeping of important papers, and there were metal filing cabinets with shining rollers on which the heavy, leather-bound books slid back and forth as the clerks took them out to make entries.

Walter was alone in the office. How like him it was to be the last one to leave. He was not sitting at his old-fashioned, roll-top desk, in his big, black, upholstered swivel chair in the general room, as she had expected, but was in a small, partitioned-off semi-private office where conferences of a personal nature

were sometimes held. The door of the inner room was open and through it she could see Walter in his black office coat talking with a genial air of earnestness to a good-looking, rather pale girl. It was Mrs. Nettie Moore, or simply Nettie, as she was called in the office.

Walter's department and two other departments, where there was not sufficient correspondence for a stenographer, shared Nettie. Nettie would go with her book to each of the offices and then to a little side room under the iron stairway, which led to the trial room above, where she wrote out her dictation. Here alone in this little room under the stairs she sat most of the day, pecking away at her typewriter.

Nettie was a general favorite among the employees in the courthouse, where not only the administration of the county was attended to, but where also the work of the town itself was looked after. Nettie was rather small, blonde and always cheerful. Things were not easy for her, and this, possibly, was the reason why she was shown favors whenever possible. She was married to John Moore, who worked at the city pumping station down at the river, as some sort of an assistant engineer (his term), but which in reality was only a mechanic's job. Here, dressed in overalls, his hands black and greasy, he went about watching the water levels, adjusting cocks, opening valves, and packing waste into leaking joints. But he did not work steadily—trifling, was the word sometimes applied to him—and most of the weight of the home rested on Nettie's rather narrow shoulders.

One day Walter had stayed after office hours and

had gone unexpectedly into Nettie's cubicle, where he had found Nettie in the embrace of Art Looker, a clerk in the Owl Drug Store. Walter's finer sensibilities had been shocked—Nettie, married, and allowing such freedom by Art Looker, who bore a reputation none too rosy!

Walter had talked it over with Connie, trying to make up his mind what to do. It was as much the duty of the men in the other offices where Nettie worked, as his, to warn Nettie, but if the others had suspected Art Looker's growing friendliness they had taken the easier course of saying nothing. In fact, from a guarded word or two Walter had reason to believe that the others knew, but so long as nothing serious came of it they were prone, as they would have said, "to let things drift."

Walter knew that Nettie was disappointed in her husband, that her husband was little better than a loafer, and that Nettie in her narrow, pinched life yearned for romance. After her long day in her little room under the stairway she would go home; there would be supper to cook; her husband would return in his rough clothes, black half-circles under his finger nails, and then, throwing himself down on the sofa, he would wait until supper was ready. Sometimes, after supper, he would have to go back to the pumping station on the night watch; if not, he would head for his heaven—the pool hall. Nettie liked motion pictures, and there, in the theater, with the pipe organ softly playing, a world of glittering romance would unroll

before her eyes. After the show was over she would trudge home alone.

"I don't like such a thing going on in my office or anywhere else," Walter had said to Connie. "It's cheap." Walter's thin lips, which expressed such iron determination, drew into a line. "I'm not going to have it. I'll warn her and I hope it will be enough."

Many times Connie had seen this firm and decided stand which Walter had taken on such matters. His harshness amazed her. "Why, it doesn't seem like Walter at all," she would think. On such occasions his attitude seemed almost biblical. More and more the old idea that a person who had made a mistake should not be forgiven was disappearing; after all, human nature was weak. It stumbled and fell—this animal so recently out of the primeval mire—but it was struggling upward toward the stars. But Walter saw these struggles in no such generous light. A wrong had been committed. It must be paid for. Sin was sin.

Now, as Connie entered, she knew that Walter was having his talk with Nettie. He was talking to her with warm earnestness, as if he were Nettie's father, instead of being only three or four years older. Hearing the outer door close, Walter got up and closed the inner door out of respect for Nettie, and, in the private office, continued his conversation.

"It's this way," he was saying. "It'd be much easier for me not to say anything—just shut my eyes and pretend not to see it; but I like you, Nettie, and, besides, it's not the right thing for you to do. Not the square

thing," he added. "If this thing goes on"—he paused —"well, there's no telling where it will end. I want you to cut it out, Nettie."

Nettie, looking into her employer's bright blue eyes, suddenly felt herself moved; at first, when she had been called in, her indignation had risen, but now she could not resent the simple, sincere way that Walter talked to her. Even in this troubled state she recognized that he was the best friend she had in the courthouse and, twisted as was her point of view, she caught a glimpse of Walter's high idealism.

"Of course," said Walter, "I could go and tell your husband, or I could tell the other men here whose work you do, and we'd have to get somebody else, but I'm not going to do that, Nettie. I'm not even going to warn Art Looker. I want you to straighten things out yourself. If you don't"—a note of grimness sounded in Walter's voice—"well, I think you had better do it." A quick, sudden smile, so like him, spread over his face, revealing his fine white teeth. "I know you are going to do it. Aren't you, Nettie?" And for a moment his hand rested on hers.

Nettie hesitated; there was a great choking in her throat, tears struggled at the frontier of her eyes.

"Yes," she quavered.

As Walter talked, out of range of Connie's hearing, Connie's eyes fell on Walter's Panama hat. Its band was soiled. She decided that when Walter came out she would take him to Nusbaum's and get another colored band for it, for Walter must look his best tonight. No, she would go now—she could be back by

the time Walter was through; even if Walter had not finished, it would be less humiliating for Nettie to leave the office without having to face Walter's wife.

Gathering up the hat, Connie slipped quietly out.

She walked down the path which led from the front steps of the courthouse to the street, but instead of crossing the street which would take her to the west side of the Square, where the more prominent stores were, she decided to turn to the right, which would bring her to the north side of the Square. Here it was that Nusbaum's was located.

She crossed the street and was walking toward the store, her mind on Walter, when she became conscious that she was meeting somebody. Suddenly her heart seemed to stand still; then it began to churn violently.

She looked again; she was not mistaken. It was Floto. Ed Floto.

Chapter Two

CONNIE felt a strange weakness and a trembling in her knees, and yet withal a vast calmness, felt as if it were not true, and yet she knew only too well that it was true. Ed Floto. Changed, older, different, and yet the same Ed Floto. The same debonair, confident, dashing Ed Floto.

As she shook hands with him, her mind, moving with amazing rapidity, leaped back and forth across the years, and yet in a way that she could not understand; it seemed numbed and befuddled, seemed hardly to move at all. She heard herself pronouncing words and yet scarcely knew what they were. Eight years. So short, so fleeting, and yet a lifetime. And as she stood looking at his confident smile she thought how strange life was, what an incoherent mixture, what a vast, bewildering puzzle it was, and on what trifles it pivoted. She had started calmly across the street, her mind wandering pleasantly, expecting nothing to happen. In fact, she had told her mother-in-law, Mrs. Webb, that she didn't expect to see anybody at all. And then by chance she had turned down a street that she had not expected to take, and lo! Ed Floto was unexpectedly and mysteriously before her. It was like those stories of the Arabian Nights when a jinn or a

genie waved a cloth or rubbed a lamp and some one leaped out of the ground.

Eight years ago. When she was twenty.

At that time Connie had dreamed of having a career and there had been in her a restless urge which could never be stilled, and ambition had burned in her with a sweet and lovely flame. She had wanted to be a singer; faithfully she had sung at concerts, at choral clubs, in the choir, at the churches—it was said a funeral in Junction City was not official unless Connie sang—but it was getting her nowhere. And even as she stood before the people singing, the ceaseless, silent, invisible wings continued to beat against her heart. She wanted to study, to sing before greater audiences, to rise in the world. And then heaven came and took her in its arms. She could go to New York to study.

New York! A very frightened, very lonesome, very smiling young girl stood on the little wooden platform in Junction City, and kissed everybody she saw. The train came rumbling in, the platform shook slightly, a dozen people helped her scramble up the steps, and the conductor calmly waved his hand as if the world had not turned upside down.

Days on the train, then Jersey City; a great confusion, porters snatching at baggage, platform trucks fiendishly trying to run one down, a gloomy ferryboat lumbering out of its slip, New York, and then—Oh then!—the miracle of the skyscrapers. She had read of them all her life, received them on post cards, seen them in motion pictures until she thought surely

she would be disappointed in them. But as the great gray giants stood before her so solid, so light, so fairy-like, so unconcernedly mingling with the clouds, the heart of the artist in her cried with joy. And that was Connie, so sensitive, so vibrant, so constantly reaching for the few splendors that life holds on its stern platter. There she stood on the men's side of the ferry-boat (she had not noticed the dividing words over the doors) her hand on the grimy railing, her head in heaven.

What a city of promise it was! How she would work! What splendid results she would achieve! What fine friends she would make!

But soon she found the tragedy which silently stalks the streets of New York, the canker which eats out so many shining hearts. Loneliness. In Junction City she had known everybody, she had an established position, and when she had gone down the street a row of hats had always been politely elevated. And now she never saw a face she knew. Sometimes she went a whole day, and to bed at night, without speaking to a soul who was not serving her.

It was during these long days that she became acquainted with a girl student who was preparing for choral work, almost the first friend Connie had made in New York.

"Why don't you come down and live in Greenwich Village?" the girl asked. "That's the center of things; that's where all the live ones are."

Connie had known of Greenwich Village only through stories and plays and from the movies, and to

her it seemed a land of romance. But when she went to see it she was disappointed. The buildings were not so bright and shining and awe-inspiring as they were uptown. In fact, they were gray and old and tumble-down and had strange, pursuing odors. Connie took a room that no human being should have lived in, paid a week in advance, and thought that she was a real Villager. She was living in the heart of Greenwich Village, but she might as well have been in the Bronx. Connie remembered a Hans Andersen fairy tale she had read as a child, of a poor boy who had gone to a big city and had wandered about it alone and hungry. Now and then windows opened, he saw rich people dining and dancing and having good times, but no one spoke to him. He was more lonely than ever. And so now she herself was a stranger peering in windows at gay people dining and making merry.

Connie liked the queer, absurd names of the restaurants and tea rooms—"The Pirates' Den," "The Pepper Pot," "The Mad Hatter," "The Bamboo Forest," and "The Rabbit's Hole." She went alone to them and tried to feel that she was a part of this life, but she knew she was an outsider—as much an outsider as the touring parties who came and stared solemnly at one another. The loneliness grew. Now and then she saw other girls, as shy in their thoughts, but mostly the people came and went in laughing, gay parties. Everybody seemed to know everybody else—everybody except herself. She determined to get acquainted with some of these artists and writers, so much at home in this glittering world. At last she

scraped acquaintance with a girl who seemed to be the heart of bohemia itself, only to find that the girl was a bundle-wrapper in a department store. Not the kind that Connie wanted to know at all.

Now and then she saw artists going along the street with black portfolios under their arms; sometimes she saw people sketching; one had taken his easel up on the elevated train platform and stood absorbed in his work. Now and then she heard the clatter of a typewriter; one day, through a window, she saw a class going through the movements of an interpretive dance. But she knew none of these people. Her loneliness increased. She wrote many letters home.

Connie received an invitation to go to the Pirates' Ball, which is the big winter entertainment of the gay spirits who inhabit Greenwich Village, and she was delighted. In stories she had read of the Pirates' Ball, as it is given in Greenwich Village, and she had seen it in pictures in the magazines and Sunday papers and now she herself was actually going! She had been invited by a young musical student, whom she knew would never rise very high in the fierce, competitive little world of music, but he was an escort and she accepted gladly.

It more than passed her expectations—the huge ball-room made miraculously to represent a cave, the low lights, the skull and cross-bones painted on the wall. A detail that struck her was a live bat which sat on a crossbeam, its stupid glittering eyes peering at the people, its thin, skinny, revolting wings half spread as if to fly away. Here, in this air of mystery,

fierce-mustached pirates, in their high boots and red sashes, moved about, greeting one another and introducing their ladies.

"Look at them," whispered the frightened musical student; "they're all famous artists."

It was as if he had said, "Some day you'll be glad to say you have seen them. It's an honor, indeed, to be able to speak to them."

A more discriminating and less easily impressed observer might have seen in them only some of the hangers-on and *poseurs* in art who take up so much space in Greenwich Village which otherwise could be turned to good use. But Connie saw only the rings in their ears, their red sashes, and the daggers in their belts.

She had come as a milkmaid at the court of Marie Antoinette at Versailles, and now, with a pail in her hand, she tripped among the gay throng with increasing confidence. She met people, she mumbled names, she shrieked gayeties at human beings she had never seen before and never expected to see again, and her heart beat happily within her. How different it was from anything she had known in Junction City! How delightful! What a brave release it was from the tedium of the voice studio where she shrieked and warbled endless *oh's* and *ah's* and ran deadly trills.

Among the dancers was one in the gay costume of a jockey, with a resplendent silk jacket, short trousers, a long-billed cap, and carrying a jockey's whip. He spoke to everybody and seemed to know everyone, and had the easy and familiar speech which some people

have and which is so sternly denied others. Earlier in the evening Connie had seen him glancing at her and now an emissary in the person of one of the pirates approached her.

"I don't know you and you don't know me, so we're both starting from scratch," said the plenipotentiary, banteringly. "But look here, this is what I want. That jockey wants to meet you. Will it be all right?" he continued, gayly, "and what name are you going by now?"

Connie told him her name. "That's my alias this week," she laughed.

The introducer mumbled a name, but the young man in jockey costume took the words out of the other's mouth in a brisk and humorous way that appealed to Connie.

"My name is Floto," he said, "F-L-O- flow, T-O tow, Floto—same as the Sells-Floto Circus. I guess you've heard of it, but I'm no relation to the circus," he laughed.

"That's a nice costume you've got," he said as he ran his eye over her with frank admiration. "May I have the next dance?"

"I'd be charmed," returned Connie in what she thought a very grown-up and sophisticated manner.

When Connie had first come into the confusing place a ribbon of terror had tangled itself around her heart; she had looked upon herself as a country cousin; but now in the gay and commanding presence of her escort all fear vanished. He had selected her from

among all the others, this gay, popular, and spirited young man.

Connie liked Floto almost immediately.

"What do you do?" he asked, after the manner of Greenwich Village, which means, "What artistic thing do you do?" And if you don't "do" something, you are, so they believe, completely outside the pale of human consideration.

"Oh, I sing," Connie said, modestly.

Floto was interested, and as she told him more his eyes moved over her approvingly. Soon he was introducing her to others of the gay spirits in his bantering, jesting way.

"I wish you to meet Miss Constance Hastings, the singer. She's all the way from Missouri, the girl you've got to show."

Although Connie knew that he knew nothing about her ability, it was pleasant indeed to be presented in such a favorable light to the people whom a few minutes before she had looked upon with awe. "The singer." What a neat compliment!

She saw other eyes turn to her approvingly.

Floto, she found, was studying to be a scene painter. There was romance about it, some one actually connected with the theater! Connie had never known anybody who was a scene painter; she knew that scenes must be painted, but she had never associated their actual painting with anyone. Such things just happened, she had always vaguely thought. But here was somebody who brought life and living to dull sets, who could come and go at the theater as he wished; great

men spoke to him. She caught a glimpse of the romantic life he must lead. How different, how infinitely more interesting it was than the lives of the young men of her age back home, shackled to stores and the dull round of business.

The music for the dance began. The orchestra leader's hand rose, came down, the soft, insinuating throb of the music filled the room. Floto was an excellent dancer and before they had gone half a dozen steps Connie had the confidence in him that one must have to be at one's best. And now, responding to his deft leading, she floated away in his arms. The lights were turned low, there was the soft shuffle of feet, and the pulsing, stirring rhythm of the dance flowed through Connie, while a strange fairyland of figures glided before her—pirates, clowns, Turks, toreadors, queens; never had Connie seen anything to equal it. The richness of the colors, the ingenuity of the costumes, the air of gayety and abandon, quite swept her off her feet. She thought of the simple dances she had attended in Junction City, with smiling mothers sitting in chairs along the walls, watching their daughters. In comparison the dances in Junction City seemed quaint and archaic.

"You're a good dancer," said Floto at the end of the selection, as the applause pattered over the room like raindrops. "Have you been in New York long?"

"No."

"I think you are going to like it—especially if you get in with the right crowd. They're a fine bunch,"

he said as he waved his hand over the dancers. "Where do you sing?"

Connie explained that at present she was studying, but that she wanted to get some kind of choir work to do as soon as she could.

"I might be of some help to you. I know a good many people in New York, and if I can give you any introductions I'd be glad to do it."

As soon as he could, Floto returned to ask for another dance, and again Connie felt that same sweet exhilarating confidence as she floated away in his arms.

"You're good," he declared. "May I come around to call on you sometime?" he asked as they moved away to an encore.

"Yes, if you wish."

"When?"

A time was set, and as Connie went through the evening she again caught Floto's approving eyes on her.

At last the Pirates' Ball was over and Connie returned to her lone room. A few days later Floto called Connie up and came to see her, and she had the liveliest and most interesting evening she had had since she had come to New York, with the exception of the Pirates' Ball. He took her to the studios in Greenwich Village, and here she saw portrait-painters, cover artists, and sculptors at work, and heard the easy, half-gossip, half-shop talk of that section. At first Connie sat timidly back in her chair, scarcely able to say anything, but soon she found her tongue.

"I like this life; I think it's wonderful," she commented to herself.

More and more frequently she went about with him. The days in the voice studio, where she practiced, seemed more and more drab. The evenings with him were bright and cheerful.

Floto seemed to know everybody, everybody knew him, and he called the great by their first names. When he went into a Greenwich Village restaurant he liked to see how many people he knew by name; and continually he would get up from his table and go to another to talk with some one he knew. At one of the restaurants he helped cook, and made them all laugh by his comic way of juggling knives and forks and plates. Once he spread a towel over his arm and helped serve a tourist party with all the airs of a French waiter. After her lonesome days, Connie had the feeling of one who is traveling on a desert and suddenly comes upon cool trees and stimulating companions.

He took her to studio parties, where they danced. He was the best dancer she had ever known, and although at first the parties seemed a bit gay, she told herself that she mustn't be too countryish. Sometimes the people would group themselves before a fireplace or on the floor, and tell stories or play games. Now and then there would be an exchange of kisses. She met Bobby Edwards, the so-called king of Greenwich Village, and heard him play his ukelele and sing weird, daring songs. He seemed wonderful to her. After

a gay evening she would return to her lone, cheerless room.

Floto began to tell Connie how much he admired her, how pretty she was, and he took her to a magazine artist who asked her to pose for him. It seemed splendid to think that some day her picture might be on the cover of a magazine. After the loneliness, this deep personal interest Floto showed in her was very pleasing indeed. He came to be more and more on her mind; during the day she would look forward to the evening when she would see him. Then he began to call at her studio and together they would walk down Fifth Avenue to Washington Square. He found new and fascinating restaurants to take her to; there would be evenings of gayety, then her lone room again.

Surrounded by the glamour and romance of Greenwich Village, he seemed a fascinating figure, and her interest grew. Sometimes, when she was alone in her room, she would think, "I wish I could see Ed Floto this evening." Then she would get down his picture and look at it.

The next evening, possibly, he would come with his compliments and his genial banter. He began to tell her more and more frequently how much he admired her and what a charming person he thought her to be. Stirred by the marked attentions of a young man who seemed to be so promising, he came often and pleasantly to her mind. At last it was love.

But soon she found that, much as he loved her, he was not able to marry. He must think of his career;

he would have to live economically for some time, he said. Even after he had finished his apprenticeship it would be some years before he could earn much money.

"There's lots of competition in the scene-painting business," he said.

One evening she received a shock. They were riding uptown on the top of a Fifth Avenue bus when he again began to tell her he loved her and how he yearned for her.

"But I haven't got the money to ask you to marry me, darling," he said. "I don't know what I can do."

As they bumped along on the bus, Connie understood that he was suggesting that she come and live with him. She was shocked and wanted to get down from the bus, but he had put it in such a veiled way as to rob it of some of its boldness, and she continued to ride with him.

She glanced at the other people, jiggling and swaying to the motion of the bus—what if they should overhear? But they were staring at the kaleidoscope of the shop windows or were deep in their meditations.

"I suppose it shocks you," he said, as if suddenly realizing the proposal he was making. He smiled. "It isn't like a small town where everybody has a nose in your business. This isn't Junction City. In New York nobody gives a rap. You can be free here, and that's a good deal. Why, I expect there's somebody right here now on this bus who is living that way!" He swept his hand over the swaying people. "And I don't see that they are any worse than anybody else.

Life is slipping away and we ought to get all we can out of it."

He said no more about it at the time; his conversation turned to other things. When she got home that evening she determined not to see him again, and when he called up again she had an engagement. But she soon became lonesome; there was no one to take her to parties, and she wished she had him back. When Floto returned he spoke to her no more about it, but began taking her to see gay plays in which this philosophy was taken as a matter of course and recommended stories and books to her in which this was the theme. Now and then it came up in his conversation. He made light of it—this one-woman, one-man thing was quaint, he declared. One night he took her to a play entitled "Free Love," which was a merry burlesque on the subject and at which Connie had to laugh. During the play he got in a few words.

Now and then the romance of it rose before her—Floto, the dashing, the debonair, the man of the theater, the scene-painter; there would be no more days of loneliness; she could enter into the gay life of Greenwich Village. The appeal was tremendous. But deep in her was her training, her fineness of character; the two desires were pitched in battle.

There were other rides, other talks, other appeals. It now did not seem so shocking. One evening he took her to visit a couple, black-and-white artists they were, and she enjoyed herself immensely. In fact, the woman, taking a fancy to Connie, asked Connie if she would not come some day and have tea with her.

"Of course, you know, they aren't married," Floto remarked, casually, on the way home.

The incident made an impression on her. The couple she had liked the most of all were not married.

More days went by—more evenings of loneliness—the bright hours with Floto.

One evening Floto threw a party, as he called it, in his studio. At first Connie sat a little timidly among the gay spirits, but Floto brought her into the conversation, he made her the center of attraction, and after a time Connie felt at home. During the evening, Floto, always the leader in such revelry, got a saw and, placing the handle between his legs, flexed and unflexed the saw while he tapped it with a hammer. This gave a curious ringing resonance, and by manipulating the blade Floto could produce the semblance of a tune. Connie had never before seen a musical saw, and to her it seemed immensely clever. Putting the saw aside, Floto, now in high spirits, gave an exhibition of juggling and card tricks. He was not clever at the manipulations, but by burlesquing them he added to the spirits of the party. Soon others were doing impromptu bits—dancing, singing, lightning caricatures, imitations. The novelty and bizarreness of the studio party appealed to Connie immensely.

"The next will be something else," said Floto. "Now watch the professor. He will now produce a rabbit before your eyes. Does anybody see any livestock here?" He gave his hands a flourish over the studio. "Well, now just watch the professor," he repeated.

And then he began to make a welsh rabbit.

When the party was over, Connie remained until after the others had gone, as Floto was to escort her home. It was now late, a bed of coals lay sleeping in the fireplace, and in the low light the studio suddenly seemed a world of romance.

"Don't go just yet," Floto begged. "Stay just a few minutes. I can't afford to have a party every night, you know."

They sat before the glowing coals, gazing into their winking depths.

The romance of it. The studio, his embraces, the mystery of the late hour; now and then the honk outside of a late taxi, far away in the distance the faint rumble of an elevated train; then sudden quiet again . . . only themselves. . . .

At first she told herself that it was very beautiful —two people who loved each other, she going to her singing and he to his studio, but soon she knew it wasn't beautiful. In fact, it was squalid—the dodging of people, the pretences, the subterfuges.

She found that Floto was not the great scenic artist he had made himself out to be. One night he took her to the theater and told her that he had painted the scenery. Later she discovered that it was not true and that he had been only the helper.

Some days he did not go to the studio at all. "I only work when I feel the inspiration," he would say, and would sit all day in his bathrobe, drinking coffee and smoking endless cigarettes.

Now and then he complained that others at the studio were given better chances than he and that

favoritism was being shown. Sometimes he talked about getting into other work, and then the next day the sun would be out and all would be well, and again he would be the zestful, debonair man who had first captured her attention. All the money he could get together he bet on horse races—"Just taking a little flyer on the ponies," he would say. Talk of horses and their performances constantly threaded his conversation. Evenings he would come home with racing-forms in his pocket, excited about some inside tip he had just received. This time he would make a killing.

"Say, Con," he said one evening (he seemed to begin all sentences with "Say"), "if you'll just lend me a little money, I know absolutely that I can pull off something big. I've got a tip this time straight from the stall."

She had lent him the money, but the stall was wrong.

She began to see Floto in a clearer light. After the first flush had worn off, he was not the romantic figure she had thought him to be at all. In the picturesque costume at the Pirates' Ball he had seemed good-looking, but now she saw that his teeth were bad, that his face was narrow, with a sharp, acquisitive look. And instead of being the grand man about town, the studio favorite, he was flashy, all outward display. He liked cheap jewelry.

And then unexpectedly he would do some nice, wholehearted, even generous, thing. One day a child was run over on the street and Floto followed the ambulance to the hospital and went to see the parents,

and later he sent candy and cakes to the child's room. When he did such kind, unselfish things, Connie's heart went out to him and she would see him in a different light.

His small cheapnesses she could put up with, but in him she soon found something deeper and more dangerous. It was his air of constantly being on the hunt. Girls ran through his conversation, they seemed to dwell almost continually in his mind. Now and then, when he talked to some other man, Connie could hear sly remarks drop from his lips and she knew that he was doing what he called "talking 'em over." Another expression of his was "looking 'em over."

It shocked her, when she had given him everything, to find that he was already searching elsewhere for romance.

"You're the only one I'm interested in, Con," he declared when she mentioned it to him. "I wouldn't dream of being interested in anybody else," he repeated.

But his eyes still wandered.

One evening, as she was crossing Washington Square, she saw him ahead of her with a girl younger than herself—"he liked 'em young" he told his fellow spirits. Connie recognized her as a girl studying dancing, a mere slip of a girl, pleased at the attentions she was receiving. Later that evening, when Connie asked him about it, he denied having seen the girl.

When she had told him the place and circumstances, he had put it lightly aside. Oh, well, since she must know, he had run across the girl and taken her home,

that was all. What was wrong in walking across the park with a girl? It was nothing to get het up about.

But it had happened again.

He borrowed money, more inside tips; the money was not returned. Coldness, quarrels, other girls. Days when he didn't speak to her. After a time the so-called romance was over.

No one in Junction City knew anything about it; no one from Junction City had come to Greenwich Village during that time; to the acquaintances she had made in Greenwich Village it meant little. And when the people of that period of her life had disappeared, the danger was over.

At last she realized that she did not have the fire, the ceaseless longing, dearer than life itself, which is necessary to make a success of an artist, and then she had come back home and married the most wonderful man in the world. It was strange, too, because she had been in high school with him and had known him practically always and had not suspected what a wonderful person he was. And then she and Walter had gone off to heaven on West Oak Street. She had "settled down," and then the wonder of all time had happened—the twins. She now took *Musical America,* and when she saw the pictures of the people who had been students along with her, some of them becoming figures in the world of music, her heart ached. And then she would brighten up. Walter and the twins more than made up for it. Her music was now limited to singing at such affairs as at the Country Club or at the church.

Now that it was all over, she had a sense of the cheapness of the whole affair. While it had lasted it had seemed splendid and romantic. She had drugged herself with the idea that nothing but love mattered; but now she knew that it was a cheap and tawdry thing to do; in a way which she could not explain, the finest and noblest of her had slipped away. She had made herself common, in spite of the high-sounding words she had used at the time. It was this secret, housed within her, that hurt. Sometimes, when Walter took her into his arms with the deep trust which was so much a part of his nature, needles pricked at her heart.

After Walter had proposed, and during the time they were waiting to be married, she had wanted to tell him the truth, and several times she had tried, but the words stuck in her throat. It was distasteful even to think about; and now that she had got away from it, she could hardly realize that it was she who had done such a thing. Often she made up the words she would use when she started to tell him, but when the time came and simple, devoted, unsuspecting Walter had her in his arms, the words fled. No, she could not drag up her shame and bare it to his sight. Walter, with his training, his background, his rugged idealism—no, she could not tell him.

"Listen, Connie," said Walter one evening soon after they were married, as he held her in his deep embrace, "I don't want to get off on the wrong foot in this business. We're going to be tied up together a long time and I want to wipe my slate clean before

we start. I've run wild a few times and I want to be honest about it and tell you, so you'll know I'm not trying to hide anything."

And then he told her of two or three mild adventures he had had, not very serious, indeed, but to honest Walter they had seemed tremendous. Once, with two or three chosen friends, he had gone to Kansas City and had, as Walter phrased it, made a night of it. At another time he had gone to Des Moines and there had made a street acquaintance. Small and passing adventures, all, but to Walter, so inherently honest, they seemed mountains.

"I just had to tell you," he finished, moved by the recital. "I've been dreading it. Now," he declared with tremendous relief, "it's over. I just couldn't come to you, darling, without telling you everything."

Deeply and intensely Connie wanted to confess the cheap and sordid misstep she had made in New York; the words trembled on her lips, and then as she looked at Walter, so genuinely stirred, so deeply repentant of his own small sins, so eager for her absolution, she could not bring herself to utter the damning words. The next day it had been harder; during the first few months she had thought of it often; time after time she had framed the words, but when the actual moment came she could not utter them. After a time she had decided not to tell him at all.

There was no danger; no one in their world knew; she was perfectly safe.

And now, suddenly, Floto.

Chapter Three

AS FLOTO appeared before her, Connie felt a shock, a sudden groping. She had the feeling that it was not true, that it could not possibly happen, and yet there he was blandly before her. It was the feeling which she had had sometimes at night when walking along a familiar street and had found an unexpected rise in the sidewalk and had floundered in her step. There was no danger of falling, and yet it gave her a quick, unpleasant start.

"What does he want? How did he get there?" demanded a powerful invisible being who lived within her.

But in spite of this silent questioning she had no fear, only a sense of the abrupt, unsetting, suddenness of it. If Floto had only sent her word, if he had only let her know in advance that he was passing through, it would not be so bad. It was the feeling she sometimes had had when she had gone into a room to find some one there when she had expected to find no one at all.

She had read stories of how women who had had adventures and who had married and settled down, content in domesticity, had had men out of their past come into their lives again. With the man had returned the old romance, the old glamour, and the wife's placid home had been upset. But she felt, as

she looked into Floto's slightly squinting eyes, that she could never love him again. *Ugh!* A slight shiver passed over her. Of course she couldn't—that would be impossible—but still it was nice, after the first shock, to see him again. He would be able to bring her news of the people who had so completely slipped out of her life. Besides, Floto was always "good company."

The past came rushing back to her, but now, even confronted by him, it seemed like a dream. And yet some of the details stood out with the sharpness of the first lightning of spring. The scene on the Fifth Avenue bus when he had first broached the subject; the night of the welsh-rabbit party when they had sat before the sleeping fire. For a moment the romance of those days rose before her, then faded away again. Now she had her place in life, her home, her family, her husband. No, never again could he appeal to her as he had in those early, lonely days.

Floto had "settled down," too, no doubt, with the responsibilities of a family, and was now probably passing through Junction City on his way to Kansas City or St. Louis to design scenes for a theater. And again there rose in her a faint wish that she, too, had continued her career. It would be pleasant to talk to him a few minutes and gossip of old friends, and then he would go on his way again.

Curious how these little vagrant thoughts went flickering through her mind while she carried on a conversation with him about something else. And she wondered if he, too, were thinking his own thoughts.

Now that the surprise of the meeting was over, she looked at him with the curiosity she always had when she met a person whom she had not seen in years. Her first impression was that he was not the Floto she had known at all, but a person faintly resembling him. He was short and small-bodied, and about his face was a narrowness which, as he had grown heavier, had become more pronounced—almost hatchet-faced. In the Greenwich Village days his suits, although pronounced, were artistic—corduroy was his favorite—but now he wore a suit that was merely "loud." The suit was checked, such as is usually worn on the stage to represent a "sporty" character. He had, no doubt, prospered.

"Why, hello, Con!" he greeted her as he removed his hat. "I expect I gave you quite a surprise. Didn't I? Well, I have been keeping my eye out for you. I thought maybe I'd run across you."

And then Connie understood, as he continued, that he was no longer a scenic artist—it was a crummy profession, he said; they didn't give a person a chance. A little bunch kept their own men on top and wouldn't let anybody else in, no difference how good the person was. He had got tired of the whole thing and had told them to jump in the river, and had gone out for a company which owned a string of billboards through the Middle West to—as he said—spread paint for them.

"Well, how are you?" he continued. "I knew Junction City was the old home burg. Remember how you used to talk about it? Thought it was some

place, didn't you?" His eyes moved with an amused glance up and down the street with its small stores. "I had heard that you were married, but I didn't know your married name, but when they routed me through here I thought maybe I'd run across you, and sure enough here you are."

As he talked, Connie realized how far apart they had grown, and the chasm that now divided them. A picture of the night of the Pirates' Ball flashed before her—Floto in his brightly colored jockey suit, the confidence with which he moved among the people, laughing and talking and speaking to everybody. A great person he was then, a favorite of the floor—and now a billboard painter! He was changed since those days, and yet somehow he was the same. In a way that she could not quite put her finger on, he was coarser, less attractive, and his aggressiveness had grown. And now as he stood before her in his checked suit, she wondered that she could ever have been interested in him at all.

Her first flash of feeling, as she understood that he had gone down in the world, was a fleeting moment of triumph, and then quickly taking its place came the feeling of human kinship which we have for all other human beings who must struggle against almost overwhelming forces, and she felt sorry for him. Although he was cheap and flashy, he was human. She would be "nice" to him, not ignore him on the street and walk on, as some women might have done. Riding on top of this was another feeling. It was one of bitterness against him that he, as the expression goes,

had taken advantage of her. He was older, more experienced, crafty, and yet she knew that he was not all to blame. She should have shown more character. But now that was all over. After all, he had been only following out the deepest and most unwavering impulses of his being. No doubt he had had other adventures—he always would, she knew; it meant nothing to him, and he would not speak of it. It was a door, such as she had seen in old buildings, which masons had come along and covered up and filled in with bricks and then plastered over until now no one would know that a door had ever existed in the now smooth surface.

"I've got twins now," announced Connie, proudly.

"Is that so?" exclaimed Floto. "Well, that's fine! Good for you! They must be cute."

"I suppose you're married now," said Connie.

No, he wasn't, Floto said. He hadn't ever loaded himself up with a family. Too much responsibility.

He looked at Connie intently a moment.

"Say, if it wouldn't be asking too much, I'd like to run out to the house and see you. You know how I mean, just drop in while I'm here. I get awfully tired sticking around a hotel all on the lonesome. I expect I could tell you about some of the people you haven't heard of for some time. You remember—" and he gave the name of one of the men she had known. "Well, Jim is sure stepping out—advertising artist. You know how they clean up." Suddenly, as he continued to talk, Connie seemed back in a far-away world which had suddenly become interesting.

"Yes," she said, cordially, "we'd like to have you come and take dinner with us."

She knew it would be agreeable to Walter. She had mentioned Floto to him, and had not hidden his name as some women might have done. The homeless, hotel-tired Floto would come for an evening; she would hear news of old friends; and then he would be on his way again.

Floto leaped at the chance. "When?"

"Monday night. My new name is Webb," she explained. "Walter Webb, in the telephone book. I'll be glad to see you," she smiled.

There remained before her, after she had gone on, the picture of Floto, older than when she had known him, and coarser. Now that she was better able to evaluate life, she could realize how cheap and flashy he must have been when she had known him in Greenwich Village.

At the dinner, what would he be like? What would he talk about? Would Walter like him?

In the store she bought the colored band in a daze; she heard herself talking, felt herself smiling, and knew that she was making herself agreeable, as she always did, to the salespeople; and yet this mind did not seem a part of her. Her real mind was turning over the thing that had just happened.

"I'll take this band. It's just what I want," she said, brightly.

After the first surprise of the encounter she began to feel better. After all, it wasn't as upsetting as she thought. Naturally, if Floto came to town where

she was, he would want to call; in a few days, at most, he would go away and everything would be over. It was much better this way than to try to evade him.

When Connie reached Walter's office Nettie had risen and was standing at the door of the little inner room, her slender hand on the door knob. They were still talking. Connie could see that Nettie had been crying and now she could hear Walter's firm, friendly voice:

"I hate like shucks to do it, Nettie, but I don't want to have any woman around my office even suspected of such a thing. It's not the right atmosphere. I want to think of you in a finer, bigger way." His voice softened. "Don't be afraid. I'm not going to say anything more about it; I'm not going to keep nagging you." Then a note of warning crept into his voice. "Of course, if you don't do it, then we'll have to let you go, and you know if we do it'll be pretty hard for you to land another place."

Connie heard the firm, unyielding tone in Walter's voice and knew what it meant, knew that Walter, the idealist, would not hesitate a moment if the decision must be made. Out she would go. "Harsh," he would be called by some. A thought flashed through her mind of stories she had heard of stern New England fathers who had banished their daughters when they had found that their daughters had made a misstep. It was no longer done, of course, but there was about Walter some of this same high, misguided relentlessness.

Nettie hesitated a moment, her lip quivering. "It

won't happen again, Mr. Webb. I promise you that." Turning, she grasped Walter's hand in silent appreciation. "Y-you'll see, it won't happen again," she quavered. "It's mighty nice for you to talk to me this way." For a moment her eyes flashed and her pride rose as if to say, "I wouldn't let anyone else talk to me that way." "Good night," she said aloud and then walked quickly out.

As Connie saw the close of the little scene, she had a deep feeling of appreciation for Walter. No one else could have talked so firmly to Nettie as Walter and afterward have Nettie turn in the doorway and thank him.

Connie waited a moment and then entered.

"Look what I've got for you," she said, easily, displaying the colored band. "I want you to look nice tonight. The other was beginning to fade."

"You darling, always thinking of me," said Walter and, taking her into his arms, kissed her.

"I've got a surprise for you," said Walter as he straightened out the papers on his desk. "Guess what it is. Something for you and nobody else in the world."

It was like Walter, this boyish air of mystery he liked to arouse. "I'll give you a clue. It's in the vegetable kingdom."

A few minutes later she found out what it was. Walter had telephoned the florist and ordered roses, and now as he drove up before the flower shop in the car he honked and the attendant came out with a long, crinkly package.

"You're to wear them tonight," said Walter as they drove on.

As they passed the hotel, Connie saw Floto sitting in the window of the lobby, gazing into the street, as the women passed by, looking 'em over. His eyes fastened on Connie, and before she could turn her head away his hand went up in a familiar wave.

Walter glanced at Connie in astonishment.

"Who's that?" he asked.

Connie hesitated, and a part of her wished to evade telling him. "I could pretend that I didn't see him," something in her whispered. At least she could delay telling Walter until they were alone that night, and then arrange a more favorable story, but Connie put it aside; such deception was no part of her. With this one exception she had always told him the truth and had not misled him with the small deceits that thread so many households. It was one of the reasons why Walter was so proud of Connie.

"She's a square-shooter," he often said.

And then, as they rode along, she told him of meeting Floto, whom she had known in Greenwich Village, and explained how he had practically invited himself to dinner.

"I made it Monday evening. Was asking him all right, darling?"

"Of course it was," returned Walter, heartily, as he gave her hand a squeeze. "Glad you did, Connie. You two can have a good chin."

Walter sank back into his big leather chair, when he reached home, to have a rest before his speech at

the Country Club. His head dropped back, his feet were now stretched out, his eyes closed. As he half lay, half sat, dozing, Mrs. Webb entered the living room, an anxious, searching look on her face, a dust-cloth in her hand. But at the sight of her son her expression was transformed. By some miracle the lines of weariness and worry departed, and in their place came a look of tenderness and loving concern. Carefully she approached her boy, gazing down at him as if she seemed to remember something half forgotten, but dear and precious. A faint smile hovered over her thin, bloodless lips, and then, softly drawing the blinds, she crept out again, the dust-cloth still in her hand.

"Hush! Your father's sleeping," she warned the twins.

A moment later Connie, coming from the back porch, started through the kitchen toward the living room.

"Don't go in there," she said to Connie, in a half-whisper. "I've pulled the shades. I think he'll sleep a while. He works so hard, the poor boy."

Walter continued to sleep peacefully.

Chapter Four

CONNIE had never felt prouder of her husband than when he stood up to make his speech at the Country Club. Now and then, as he spoke, a broad, contagious smile spread over his face, his white teeth flashed, there would be a responsive ripple from the audience; then his face would grow sober and he would go on with his talk.

With a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction Connie looked at the scene. The subdued lights shed a softness that appealed to her; there was the sound of music as the people ate; later in the evening the rugs in the lounge would be stripped back, the sofas and settees moved out, and there would be dancing. Seated at the tables were members of the finest and most prominent families of Junction City. They were not rich, measured by city standards, but many of them had traveled abroad, they kept abreast of the times, and their interest in life was as wide as those in the denser areas of population. These people had been her friends since childhood. Some of them she liked better than others, and for many of them she had an abiding affection.

But there was one fly in the evening's entertainment. Avis Templeton. Avis was a year or two older than Connie, and was the leader of the so-called "un-

married set" which, at the age Avis had reached, mingled with, and constantly flowed into, the married set until sometimes it was hard to tell where one began and the other left off. Avis and Connie had grown up together, they had been in high school together, and they now moved in the same set. Avis had never married. She was of that large class of girls—good-looking, sprightly, attractive—who in their twenties never lack for attention, and yet for some reason never go off to a heaven of their own making. Avis had gone to more parties, danced more men into abject weariness, played more games of bridge, and knocked more golf balls across the course than any other girl in Junction City, without, as Walter said, ever completing a twosome. Many men had buzzed around her, now and then there had been rumors of an engagement, but after a time the men had gone on their ways. On each occasion Avis had been depressed for a time, and then she had grown more sprightly than ever. Sometimes she was to be found only in the set composed of people some five or six years her junior, when she was the merriest of the lot; then suddenly the wind would change, when she would be with "the young married set" again, where she was not quite such a jolly sprite.

Avis was jealous of Connie, and as Connie's position had grown, Avis's jealousy had increased. But back of this jealousy was an incident in their girlhood when unwittingly Connie had brought gossip down upon Avis. A merry party had gone on a hayrack ride one balmy evening, but when time came to start back, Avis

and one of the young men could not be found. The others called for them, the old farmer driving the hayrack had cupped his hands into a horn and had sent up a terrific blast, but Avis had not heard.

"They're afraid they will be found," Connie declared.

She meant it as a joke, but a few of the merrymakers on the hayrack had taken it seriously. After a time Avis, looking embarrassed, had arrived with the young man in tow, but suspicious glances were thrown at her. The story had grown and for some days was gossiped about by the younger social set. The stroll that Avis had taken with her escort had been quite harmless, but as Avis heard of it from all sides she was quite piqued by it. She blamed Connie for being the one to start it, and although the incident was now several years old, Avis still secretly held it against Connie. They were friends, as people in small towns are, who see each other constantly, but buried deep was a thorn.

And now, as Walter sat down, Connie saw Avis's eyes move toward her with a glance that only Connie could interpret.

At last the evening was over and Connie was very proud indeed of the success Walter had made of it. The people went out to their cars, which, with their lights turned low and their black forms faintly looming in the dark, looked like silent monsters of some prehistoric day. There was the sound of doors opening, the sing of self-starters, a jumble of good-nights and the evening was over.

But even as they sped home Connie was thinking of something else: The dinner at her own home on Monday evening. Floto. Had she made a mistake in letting Floto ask himself to dinner? And then, sleepily, she tumbled into bed.

Monday came.

Connie cooked the dinner, as it was understood, when there was "company," that this was Connie's work. Mrs. Webb's contribution was to put the children to bed and to do the jumping up from the table during the meal. During this process Connie could be a lady.

For a time Connie had thought of getting Mrs. Meloney, the town cook, to prepare and serve the dinner—a luxury which occasionally Connie reveled in —but after such Oriental ease Connie always suffered the pangs of regret, for there was the budget to think of. And so Connie had pared a bushel of potatoes, chilled enough lettuce for a meeting of the Lady Maccabees, and strung enough beans to carry a hotel over a holiday (or so it seemed), and now all was ready for the door bell.

After Connie had got the upper hand of the dinner, she had flown upstairs, leaped into the tub, splashed a few minutes, and leaped out again, dressed and started down the stairs, hoping that she looked like a hostess in a magazine advertisement. A slight reverberation came to her, and she knew that the twins were in the kitchen eating their supper. On occasions of company the twins must be given their dinner first and then, by a superhuman feat of strength, engineered up the stairs

and maneuvered into bed. There they would lie quietly for fully five minutes, in a state of heavenly perfection which only the twins could attain—and then Albert would have to have a drink. After his terrific thirst had been satisfied and Connie had gone downstairs again, Allen would lose his hankie. And so up and downstairs Connie would trudge, till at last peace and comfort came and took the weary household into its soothing embrace. And then—such was Connie!—just before she piled into bed for the night, she would go and stand beside the blessed twins as they slept and her heart would swell within her that she could ever have produced such miracles of perfection.

The twins were now in the dining alcove, eating, as Connie firmly believed, like hippopotamuses. Sometimes, on such occasions, they seemed rightfully meant for a circus, but when she went to other homes and saw other children in the process of having their appetites appeased, her heart grew lighter and the simile of the circus no longer haunted her.

Connie was proud of the neat little dining alcove in the kitchen, where the twins sat, for she was one of the few women in Junction City to have that formality-saving device. A year ago, after much planning and enough figuring to complete a courthouse, they had decided on an addition to the kitchen. Walter had first suggested putting in the simple alcove, but to Connie it was a luxury beyond their means. She knew that if it were something for himself Walter would have hesitated, but when it was something for her, the appeal could not be resisted.

"Of course we can afford it, Connie," he had said, and had given the order to the carpenters.

Connie liked the little shining-white table, with the benches on each side of it, tucked snugly in the kitchen, financially devastating as it had seemed at the time. Now it had become a necessity and another example of Walter's thoughtfulness.

Mrs. Webb, arrayed in her company gown, sat by the side of Albert, coaxing him into being a nice, polite little man.

"Now everybody chew," chanted Mrs. Webb.

"One-two-three-four—
Chew some more.
One-two-three-four—
Chew some more."

And while she counted, Mrs. Webb opened and closed her mouth as if it contained some splendid and delectable morsel.

Connie looked at the adorable twins, solemnly staring at each other with unblinking eyes as they moved their jaws to the rhythm of the count.

"Oh, you lovey-dovey ducks!" cried Connie, and swooped her arms around them. "I could just eat you up."

"If you get their minds off their eating they won't chew so well," complained Mrs. Webb, mildly. "Is everything straightened around?"

This referred to the process which she and Connie always went through before the arrival of a guest. It was the last-minute preparation when they would make a final tour of inspection over the sitting room

to see that there was no unusual and embarrassing object left by a visitation of the twins.

"Yes, everything is all right," answered Connie.

"You didn't leave the velocipedes on the porch, did you?"

Earlier in the afternoon Connie had gone out with the twins and they had ridden their velocipedes, and when Connie had come in, Allen had left his on the front porch. Now that her attention was called to it, Connie knew that the velocipede was on the porch, but it was out of the way and would attract no attention. And there were worse sins than leaving a child's plaything on the porch. In fact, Connie liked to see children's toys scattered about—it made a house seem homey. But there was the watchful eye of her mother-in-law, always so worried about "what people would say," always so faintly complaining, but never openly critical.

Connie opened the door.

"Yes, it's there."

It was as if she had said: "I am surprised it is there. I don't know how it could possibly have got there, but there it is."

"You better bring it in," said Mrs. Webb. "If people see such things littered on the front porch, they'll think we're getting careless. People talk so easily, you know. . . .

"One-two-three-four, chew some more."

Connie trundled the velocipede through the sitting

room and into the kitchen so that the sensibilities of the neighbors would not be shocked.

"You wiped off the glass cage all right, did you?" asked Mrs. Webb.

The question referred to a dust-catcher of a high order which reposed on a small side-table in the living room. It was a glass cage inside which two stuffed canary birds, perched on a lacquered limb, gazed out upon the world with beady glass eyes. It was an old-fashioned parlor ornament, of the kind once seen on the what-not shelf, but which has given away before the march of progress. When Mrs. Webb had given up housekeeping and had come to live with Connie and Walter, she had brought it with her. It did not fit in with Connie's furniture, and gave a cheap, discordant note to the room. Connie was sensitive about this glaring, old-fashioned eyesore and made various excuses to get it upstairs to Mrs. Webb's room, but Mrs. Webb had thought that it should be downstairs "where everybody could see it."

A thin film of dust gathered constantly on the glass cage. No matter how thoroughly Connie cleaned and dusted the room and wiped off the cage, it always had, a few hours later, its fine gray coat. Mrs. Webb knew this and would herself wipe off the glass cage, usually with her apron. At times she would be sitting in the room, resting, her eyes staring almost as motionlessly as the birds', when she would get up abruptly, go over to the glass cage, wipe it off, replace it carefully on its worn plush base, and then would come back and sit down again. But however much trouble it caused, or

however much Connie might wish that it would go where it so richly belonged, Mrs. Webb would not give it up.

"Walter's poor father gave it to me the first year we were married and I'm always going to keep it," she would say.

Sometimes Connie wished the twins would break it. One day, when she was particularly disturbed, the wicked thought had come to her of breaking it herself. She imagined herself picking up the glass cage, raising it high above her head, and hurling it triumphantly into the corner. But such a thought was too ridiculous, too preposterous, to entertain. No, she would do nothing quite so desperate as that. The birdies would have to stay there until Kingdom Come.

"No, I didn't wipe it off; I forgot it," answered Connie to Mrs. Webb's question.

Getting up from the table, Mrs. Webb took a tea towel from the rack over the sink, went into the living room, carefully wiped the dust from the glass, and then came back and sat triumphantly down without a word. It was as if she had said aloud, "If I didn't do the things around this house, they'd never be done properly."

And then she took up her chant again:

"One-two-three-four—"

The ordeal continued.

After Connie had left Floto, the day she had met him on the street, she realized that their worlds had grown apart, but there were many things she would

like to ask him. The names of acquaintances she had made in Greenwich Village had come back to her; Floto would be a compendium of information about them, and again she could live over the days of her ambitions in New York.

Connie had given thought to a possible reference, by word or look on the part of Floto, to their former days together in Greenwich Village, but she felt sure there would be none. It would not be like him to recall by the slightest hint that part of her past. If he had been going to mention anything of those days, he surely would have done so when they were alone on the street. But so far as his actions indicated, their past —that much of it—had never existed. And yet, in spite of these assurances, now and then a strange uneasiness rose in her heart. . . .

The door bell rang. The moment had come.

Involuntarily her hands went up to her hair, played over her ears a moment, and darted behind her head to see that all was well, and then she started for the door. She would be cordial to him, but she would establish him on the plane of distant, vague friendship, and there he must remain.

The table, as she walked through the dining room, was set and waited only the match for the candles. Connie prided herself on the attractive appearance her dining-table presented on the occasion of a dinner. "How do you do it? How do you get everything so just right?" asked the other young married women of the set in which Connie moved in Junction City. "Out of the ten-cent store. I couldn't go downtown

shopping without popping in there," she laughingly told them, but, although this was true, much of it was due to Connie's artistic sense. Two colored streamers now trailed their way gayly across the length of the table—"the Lincoln Highway," Walter called them. On the occasion of a real dinner party, when there were several guests, there would be a great mysterious bowl in the center of the table with strings radiating from it, like a spider web, and when these were pulled, attached to the ends were found paper caps and various favors all from the same helpful ten-cent store. But now, even though there was no party, the table was arranged prettily and effectively.

When Connie opened the door there was a smart roadster outside—a much nicer car than Connie and Walter could afford—and on the porch stood, not Floto at all, but Avis Templeton.

"Hello, Connie!" Avis breezed as the door opened. "Hope I'm not interrupting. Can stay only a minute. Thought I'd drop around and ask if you and friend hubby wanted to sit in on a bridge game tonight."

"Friend hubby"—how like Avis this was, Connie thought. Avis always called Walter or any husband "friend hubby," as if in some way making all husbands members of a mysterious clan about whom one could not talk as one could about other members of the human race. If a few persons met for bridge, and if one of the husbands came in alone and late, Avis always buzzed around the wife. "Kiss your hubby; give him a welcome." And there she would stand,

smirking and twittering, until the two had greeted each other.

Connie explained that she could not go, hoping that Avis would leave, but Avis wormed her way in. Her eyes swung around to the dining room.

"Having a party, are you? *Heh*—candles, paper runners, flowers—quite a gay affair, I see."

Connie tried to put it off; it was nothing; she just thought she would dress up the table a little, that was all, while something within her kept wishing that Avis would go. But not Avis; not when there was a bit of news to be uncovered.

"It's for Mr. Edward Floto," said Connie, finally. "I don't think you know him."

Never before had she used the name Edward; it had always been "Ed," but now it seemed more impressive to make a formal name out of it.

"He's from New York," called out Mrs. Webb from the kitchen. That lady let little of the household conversation escape her.

"From New York! No wonder you've got the festal board all dolled up. It's not the man you were talking to on the street the other day, is it?"

Connie looked at Avis in astonishment. After all, how much a small town Junction City was. Connie had not talked to him five minutes, and yet Avis had known about it.

"Connie knew him when she was studying in New York," contributed Mrs. Webb. "He was an artist."

"A real live artist! Think of that! And you never

told us a word about him. Don't you think we ought to give him a tea or something?"

He wasn't an artist, Connie explained. He was a scene painter. "I think he's—well, engaged in painting billboards just now." She was able to get the words out.

"Oh—oh—I see!" declared Avis and then her bright eyes rested on Connie a moment.

"Scene-painting is a difficult profession. It's awfully hard to rise in," declared Connie, remembering Floto's words. "So much jealousy. Of course he's just doing it for the time being."

Avis rose. She must run along, she said. Awfully sorry that Connie and friend hubby couldn't drop in and have a game of bridge, but still it must be nice to be able to talk over old times.

"Good-by. See you soon. I hope your dinner party's a big success."

The door closed and Avis went tripping out to her sleek car, which a moment after went purring down the street.

Connie moved dispiritedly about the room, and again there rose before her that faint, fleeting yet analyzing glance that had rested for a moment in Avis's eyes.

The twins had now finished their meal and, with Mrs. Webb's help, Connie was able to get them up the stairs, pretending that the stairway was an airplane sailing through the skies and carrying them along with it. Then safe in bed—well, not exactly safe, but, anyway, for the time being, in bed. Since this was com-

pany night, they would probably have to have a gallon of water to drink during the evening, and Allen, about the time the salad came on, would be sure to find some bread crumbs in his bed. The amount of imaginary bread crumbs she had dusted from Allen's bed was staggering.

"Here's the sandman kiss," Connie said as she snuggled the two in her arms, and then the door bell rang.

It was Floto.

"Hello, Con!" he said, as Connie opened the door. "I thought I'd have to get William J. Burns himself to help me. I've just about knocked on every door on this street trying to find you. It's all because of the snippy way you Junction City people have of not putting your street address in the telephone book."

The reference was to the custom of listing names without the street numbers.

There was about him an echo of the debonair which once had so attracted Connie; but now that she was older and the glamour of the Greenwich Village days had departed, she could see, after the first impression, that he was pervaded by an air of cheapness. It was like the attractions in store windows. At first glance she was fascinated by them, but when she went inside and examined them more critically, their real shoddiness came out. And so now it was with Floto. He wore the same checked suit that she had seen him in when she had met him on the street. His hair glistened from a preparation that held every hair firmly in place, and in his breast pocket a cheap, highly colored hand-

kerchief floated. And as she shook hands with him she caught the same faint odor of paint and turpentine about him which once had seemed as redolent of romance as the fabled perfumes of Araby, but which now was simply offensive.

"Well! well! to think this is your own little nest," he said, rolling his eyes over the room. "Mighty nice, I say. Well, you deserve it, Con," he declared, more heartily. "It'll be nice to have a good, old-fashioned chin with you. Not much like the old G. V. days when all the furniture you had was a bed and a gas stove." His high, sharp laugh rang out. "Remember those old days! Golly, it don't seem like it was eight years ago, does it?"

Mrs. Webb, having triumphed over the twins, now came primly down the stairs, peering at the new guest from behind her gold glasses. Connie introduced them.

"I'm pleased to meet you, I'm sure," said Mrs. Webb in the formal way she always had with strangers. "Pleased to meet any friend of Connie's, I'm sure," she repeated.

Connie knew that behind those gold glasses and the almost old-maid manner Floto was being weighed by those staring, unblinking eyes. Mrs. Webb had said nothing openly, but Connie sensed that secretly Mrs. Webb had been turning over in her mind the fact that she was entertaining a man from New York, and one whom her husband did not know. Of course, it was all right, but still people were so quick to talk.

"It's been a warm day," declared Mrs. Webb.

It was what she always said. If the President dropped in, Mrs. Webb would give him the news about the weather.

It sure was, declared Floto. Nearly melted him down. Say, it was mighty nice of them to ask him out to chow; he sure got sick and tired eating off a hotel table.

"You sure look all to the good," he said as his eyes moved over Connie.

There was a step on the porch and Walter came in, and Connie introduced the two men.

Walter shook his hands heartily. "Glad to meet any old friend of Connie's. You're quite a ways from home, aren't you?"

"Yes and no," returned Floto. Any old place that he hung his hat was home to him now, since he had taken up the outdoor paint business.

Connie stood looking at the two men, mentally measuring and comparing them. Walter, when compared with the small Floto, seemed taller than when alone. Walter was all of six feet, and although he was not good-looking, there was a clean wholesomeness about him that appealed to Connie deeply. Some of the business men in Junction City neglected their personal appearance; their clothes became spotted, their trousers went too long without knowing the touch of a pressing iron; their ties became twisted and out of shape. But there was never any taint of carelessness about Walter. To Connie his personal neatness, his wholesomeness, more than made up for the good looks

which had been denied simple, honest, dependable Walter.

Walter: large, tall, well-proportioned; neatly but simply dressed; rather deliberate in his movements, with a slow, hearty handshake and a way of looking directly into one's eyes as he spoke.

Floto: small, shifty, with thin, sharp features and a swarthy skin with the impression of slight welts under the skin; his exaggerated clothes; his high, irritating laugh; his slang. The contrast between the two men stood out sharply.

Mrs. Webb, as the others talked, stood twisting her fingers, as she always did on the trying occasion of company, her eyes silently and inquiringly measuring him. After a few minutes she disappeared through the curtain into the dining room; there was a slight bustle, the soft clink of glasses, the faint flicker of a match, and then Mrs. Webb crept back into the room again and, safely out of sight behind Floto's back, went through the family dumb show of communicating to Connie that the great moment of food had arrived.

Connie proudly threw back the curtains and a very pleasant picture indeed was revealed. The candles now lifted their softly flicking spires aloft, while down the length of the snowy desert the Lincoln Highway ran straight and true with, as Walter said, filling stations along the way. This quiet, unexpected sense of humor was one of the things that endeared Walter to her. At first, when one met Walter, there was no appearance of this almost bashful sense of humor; it was only after one came to know him that one knew he had

it. In a way that Connie could not quite explain, it seemed to bring them closer together. Such phrases as this of Walter's lingered for days in her mind, and now she never put on the paper strips but what Walter's comparison came to her mind.

Flanking the snowy desert were four grapefruit, and in the center of each a red cherry looked wonderingly out upon a strange world. The rinds of the grapefruit were cut and carved and scalloped until they looked like the castellated walls of a medieval château. How much cutting and carving, how much work, had gone into those serrated walls! A few squirts of the grapefruit and all her patient work would be gone. But as Connie glanced at the attractive scene she was glad. How inviting, how home-like it looked!

Floto ran his eye over the room.

"Say, some style! Mighty nice, too. Well, I'm glad you've got it," he added.

Then his eye rested on her again as she sat across the table from him in the soft light of the candles.

Yes, he said a moment later, it was mighty nice to be here.

Almost unconsciously Connie glanced at his hands. The nails were stained by his paints, as they had been when she had known him in Greenwich Village. "They're in mourning," he had said then, jokingly. And now, as he scraped the side of his grapefruit, she saw with heartsick recognition that the circles of mourning had increased. Here and there on his hands faint specks of paint seemed to glisten.

Things hadn't gone so well with Floto, it came out

during the meal. He had got tired of slaving away for a lot of people who didn't appreciate what he was doing, so he had dropped them. For a time he had worked in another scenic studio, but they were away behind the times and when he had tried to tell them anything they thought they knew it all and wouldn't pay any attention. Finally he had told them where they could get off and then he an' another fella had worked up a vaudeville soft-shoe dancing act and they had got time for it, but the other fella, since he had worked up the idea, thought that he should get a bigger split on the money and so he had left him cold. One thing after another Floto had tried, Connie understood as he rambled along, telling of the days since she had seen him. For a while he had thought of getting into some radio line—now that was an up-and-coming business! And no brains behind it, either, all dumb-bells. But things hadn't worked out right. If a fellow had a good, snappy radio store it ought to hit 'em between the eyes, he said. For a while he had gone on the road for a magic-supply house, but the magic business was dead. Movies had knocked it in the head. After a time he had gone back to spreading paint.

He turned to Walter.

"You're sitting pretty, ain't you, Mr. Webb?"

Walter smiled in appreciation. He was proud of his little home.

"It's not bad," he said, modestly. "And we've got it paid for, too, and not everybody in Junction City can say that. Yes," he added, judiciously, "I suppose, on the whole, we ought to consider ourselves lucky."

"I should snicker," said Floto.

A moment later he was talking about hotel life again.

"Of course, we don't get anything like this," he said, waving his hand over the room. "And with a nice little wife sitting across the table," he added.

But he was going to clean up some day. The ponies. He had been working out a system—him and another fella. Y'couldn't get anywheres without a system. It took a little time to get it going, but some day he was going to hit it where it lived. Of course, for the present he had to spread paint. But that was only temporary. And he had told Mr. Katzmeier, the big boss, in St. Louis, that he wasn't going to spread paint all his life. Not him.

Connie understood, as he rattled along, that he now worked for a company which had a string of billboards across the country, with the head office in St. Louis. He went from town to town in a decrepit old car with ladders and cradles tied on it, and in the car he had his blocks and tackle and buckets of paint. The car, specked and splattered with paint, would draw up in front of a billboard and he would hoist the cradle and, getting into his smeared overalls, he would sit in the swinging cradle with a little dummy board, marked off into squares, in his hand. With this as a key he would paint the same lines, and copy the same colors on the squares of the big billboard as were on the little key board—not very high art, indeed. When the day was over, he would rattle back to the hotel, change from

the smeared overalls into his flashy checked suit, and then lounge about the hotel, "looking 'em over."

Floto sat at the table, during dinner, his arms spread out, one leg lopped over the other, turned half sidewise to the table (how well she remembered the position) talking, while his eyes continued to rest on her. Soon he was addressing all his remarks to her.

Mrs. Webb sat with her big, staring eyes fixed on Floto, silently making up her mind. Why had Connie brought this strange man to the house? Of course, the look said, it was all right, but still—well, people would think things.

"Wouldn't you like to look around?" said Walter when they had gone into the sitting room, after dinner was over.

"Sure would," said Floto.

As Walter rose to conduct Floto over the house, his pride in his little home shone in his eyes. It was his home, his castle, and he was proud of it. He took Floto into the kitchen.

"This is our dining alcove," he said, with a wave of his hand at the shining table and the high settle-seats. "It's new; not many in town, you know," he added, modestly. "A lot of people have been in to look it over."

Floto ran his eye appraisingly over the kitchen. Say! this was fine! Sure beat going out to an armchair lunch for breakfast.

"I get awfully tired of that," he added.

Then he said, "I suppose you two have breakfasts here together."

"Yes, every morning," returned Walter.

"Pretty nice, I say."

Walter, responding to the praise as they talked, turned to Floto. Maybe Floto would like to see their new oil-burner. That was the thing they were really proud of.

What a great event the oil-burner had been in their life! The matter of getting it had been the result of plans and discussions. With Walter away at the office all day, Connie could not keep the house as warm as it should be for the twins. Connie trotted endlessly up and down the cellar steps, shoveling coal, struggling with the clinkers, and patiently humoring the furnace's many whims. These seemed to grow more pronounced every year. Once it had been a fairly efficient and dependable furnace, but now it was old and crochety and had to be managed as carefully as a rich and dyspeptic relative. One of its devastating whims was to appear to be burning in the full vigor of its powers, and then Connie would drive away in the car. The moment her back was turned it would promptly go out and could be stirred to new life only after consuming prodigious amounts of kindling. Finally, on such an occasion, after she had once got it going, a burst of youthful vigor would again take possession of it and it would practically fry the twins. Especially if already it were a warm day. But if the following day were cold, it would again seem to be hibernating.

One day Walter had come home with the idea of installing an oil-burner. There was not an oil-burner in all Junction City, although their use in the cities had

become widespread. When Walter found that the price was more than they could pay, he had been cast down for days, and then he had heard of another make of oil-burner, which was cheaper and which could be purchased on the installment plan. It was not what he wished, but still it was better than for Connie to run up and down the steps, and so Walter, much of a pinch as it would be to pay for it, had ordered the furnace and had proudly watched the men install it.

"See that!" said Walter to Floto, as he pointed to a slender finger on a dial under a clock on the wall. "I'm going to move that. Now listen." He touched the finger slightly. Down in the basement there was a faint whir of machinery, and then in a moment a dull roaring. "There! it's on. The fire's started."

Walter moved his hands with the expressive, small-boy, lovely gesture that Connie knew so well. It was as if the proud magician had said: "Isn't it wonderful! And I do it so simply, too."

"Come on down and I'll show you how it works," said Walter.

As the two went down the basement stairs, Connie could hear Walter proudly talking to Floto of the wonderful invention.

"It beats pushing coal in and pulling cinders out," said Walter. "Yes," he said in answer to some remark of Floto's, "we're getting things fixed up pretty comfortable."

"You sure are," declared Floto.

"Come on in and have a seat," said Walter when they again came upstairs, and led Floto into the sitting

room and deposited him in his own easy-chair. "There, I think you'll find that comfortable."

Mrs. Webb went through the final process of putting the twins to sleep, the twins, who always became as wide awake as lynxes when there was company. A moment later Connie heard faint echoes of Mrs. Webb in the bathroom getting another drink of water for Albert. The amount of water those twins could drink on company nights was prodigious. Usually Connie's mind was also on what was happening upstairs, but now she scarcely heard the dim rumbles in the room which she had set apart and called the nursery. Her whole mind was concentrated on Walter and Floto in the front room, while she carried the dishes out to the kitchen sink, always her work. Also she must wash the dishes, much as she disliked to do it. After the company had gone, she would have to go into the kitchen and wash the dishes. She would have preferred to wait until morning, but Mrs. Webb, who always got breakfast, detested, as she said, to start the day with a sink full of dishes, and so the last back-breaking task must be performed. Now, as she passed back and forth with the dishes, she listened anxiously, but not by the slightest word did Floto hint of the past.

At last nature seemed to have gotten the best of the twins; Mrs. Webb no longer padded back and forth into the bed-room, Allen's hankie seemed to be safely in his grip, and all was well with the world. Mrs. Webb had gone safely into her room, where, when there was young company, she always spent the evening in faint rebellion. Turning off the light in the

kitchen, Connie went into the sitting room, and as she entered Walter rose with the gallantry which never deserted him. Floto hesitated a moment and then managed to get to his feet. As he talked, during the evening, Connie caught more glimpses of the rolling stone he was, going constantly from one job to another. Looking at him as he sat with one leg sprawled over the arm of Walter's big easy-chair, brushing at the cigarette ashes which had carelessly spattered his vest, she wondered more and more how she could ever have had any interest in him. But she must make the best of it; tonight would be the last time.

The door bell rang, and for a moment Connie wondered if it were Avis. It would be like Avis to find some excuse to pop in again, and Connie knew how easily and gayly Avis would sit chatting, seemingly seeing nothing, and yet her eyes etching every detail. But, instead, it was a neighbor woman, an elderly, troubled woman who lived across the street, a widow. She wanted to see Walter. By rights she should have gone to his office to see him; in fact, the other officials in the courthouse refused to see people on business except in their offices, but Walter set up no such barricade. The woman had had a chance to sell a little house which she owned and which rented for twenty dollars a month, and the man had agreed to take it.

"Now he's says the property's not clear," said the woman, anxiously—"says the deed won't hold. Would you mind looking it over and seeing what you think? I hate to disturb you with your company, b-but it's all I've got," she trembled.

"Certainly I'll look it over," returned Walter. "Glad to. I'll just run over to your house, where you've got all your papers. I expect it'll be handier. Back in a minute, Mr. Floto," he said as he went out.

Floto talked inconsequentially a few minutes, and as he continued Connie saw his bright eyes, too close together, fastened on her, and she began to chatter more brightly and spiritedly than ever. She must not let him, while Walter was gone, make any reference to the past. Especially with Mrs. Webb upstairs.

Connie saw Floto rise from his chair and walk about the room, first here and there; once he paused to stare at the stuffed birds in the glass cage, but managing slowly to draw nearer to her. Time hadn't handed her any rough deal, he said. In fact, she was better-looking than she was in—he lowered his voice—in the old days. In a moment he came nearer, apparently intending to sit on the arm of her chair.

Connie made an effort as if to rise casually and move to another chair, but in her heart was a dull, frightened throbbing. This, in her home, where he was a guest!

But Floto saw it in no such light. Connie had appeared glad to see him when they had met on the street, she had been pleasant to him at dinner, she had chatted brightly when they had gone into the sitting room . . . his mind continued to turn over the possibilities. In his code it meant nothing that Connie had a husband and family.

"Listen, Connie, you know I get awfully tired sticking around hotels all on the lonesome. Couldn't you

run down to Kansas City some day and meet me there? We could have dinner and go to a dance. I expect we would have a lot of things to talk over," he finished.

Connie heard the words numbly and yet with penetrating clearness. The effrontery, the shame of it! Was that the evaluation he had put on her?

"I'm going to order him to go," she said to herself. But a calmer thought told her that she must not do that. It would only arouse his anger; the ice was too thin. She must pursue a gentler course.

"You mustn't talk that way," she whispered, while she thought of the upstairs. "That's all over, all past, don't you understand? Don't you see, I can't—with Walter and my children?"

But Floto, misreading her, became more urgent. Yes indeed she did have a nice home—a lot better than anything he had. And her family was nice and all that, but still there wouldn't be anything wrong in dancing together. Lots of girls did, these days, and didn't think they were going to hell. People were broader than they used to be. Especially people who had stirred around a little and had been to New York and the big cities and got their eyes opened a bit. Of course, he didn't mean to be too friendly, here in a small town, but she had mentioned at dinner that her mother lived in Kansas City. What would be more natural than for her to run down to Kansas City? It'd be good for her, too—would get her mind off her household worries.

"Remember, Con," he finished, "we live only once and we ought to get all the fun out of life we can as

we go along." The same argument he had used in Greenwich Village. But now how cheap and childish it sounded.

She ought to, a pretty girl like her, he continued, and especially with—here he came closer and touched her shoulder with his hand—an old friend like him. Why! hadn't they had wonderful times together in Greenwich Village?

"Connie," he breathed, "you were wonderful!"

Connie's heart cried within her. Oh, the ignominy of it!

But she must not be angry toward him; in a few days he would leave, the danger would be over.

"Listen," he continued. "I don't mean today, nor tomorrow. But think it over." He bent closer; a harsher note came into his voice. "I think you had better do it, Con."

The door opened. Walter was back.

"I got her all fixed up," he said, cheerily, as he came in. He took no credit for having made the worried woman happy; he was glad to do it. "Now we can have a talk."

Floto began to talk about the "old days," as he called them; nothing was outspoken. Of course, Greenwich Village was a gay place; people down there had a good time; and there was the suggestion that he was one of them.

"It's been a wonderful evening," he enthused as he started to go. It sure beat holding down a chair in a hotel.

"I like this here town," he declared at the door.

"Nice little burg. Sure beats G. V. I don't blame you, Connie, for staying here—'specially settin' pretty like you are. Well, so long. Good-by. See you again."

The door closed.

Then the sound of whistling down the street.

Going heavily into the kitchen, Connie started washing the dishes. It was something to do.

Chapter Five

AT MOMENTS, the next day, Connie had the feeling that it had not happened at all. It was like an evil dream, the effects of which still clung to her, but which, she told herself, she could shake off. And for a moment she would become light-hearted again; it was not as bad as she imagined; it would pass.

The picture remained vivid to her of Floto sitting in Walter's big easy-chair, one knee lopped over the other, his estimating glance moving coolly over her. She saw again his thin, sharp features; his hair glued into shape. And she smelled again the faint odor of paint and turpentine. The teeth, which had been bad in the Greenwich Village days, were now filled with gold, and when he smiled there was an unpleasant glittering flash.

The next morning, as Mrs. Webb washed the breakfast dishes, she let it be known what she thought of Connie's caller. His clothes were too loud. Nice people dressed plainly and simply. And that diamond horseshoe pin! Mrs. Webb sighed. Were the other people Connie had known in Greenwich Village so —well, common?

"Of course," continued Mrs. Webb, plaintively, "everybody is going to know that he was here, with him asking everybody along the street where we lived."

It wouldn't have been so bad if he had come straight here and gone away again, but going up to everybody's house and asking where Mr. and Mrs. Walter Webb lived. Mrs. Webb sighed as she dried Albert's Mother Goose plate. "People are so easy to talk, you know. I suppose he will be leaving in a day or two. . . . Do you want to save the rest of this oatmeal till tomorrow? Maybe they'll eat it then."

Yes, he was going in a day or two, Connie said.

Mrs. Webb: "I think Walter treated him real nice, considering ——"

Mrs. Webb let the words hang. This was a trait of hers—to begin a sentence which seemed freighted with consequences and then, as she came to the significant part, to pause and let it dangle in the air. It was as if she were thinking aloud and suddenly realized what she was saying, and then let it trail off into nothing. People have been shot for less.

"Well," she picked it up again, "considering everything. . . . Albert played with his butter again this morning. I told him I was going to tell you. Didn't I tell you, Albert, that I was going to tell mamma?"

Albert was dragged out of the corner, where he was building a castle out of stewpans, to face his crime. How like Mrs. Webb this was, too, Connie thought—to make some remark disturbing to Connie, a pin prick, and then to divert attention to something else. And now Mrs. Webb was on Floto's trail.

The second day after the dinner, Floto called up. He had to go to the billboard, he explained, and take some photos of it for the file album which the company

always made of all its locations. Mr. Katzmeier was very particular about this, he said. Floto was going out to the location in the car, and if he came by, would Connie and the twins jump in and run out to the place with him? It was on the Arkoe road, a short distance from Lovers' Leap, he explained.

How much this was like Floto, she thought—the audacity of wanting her to go out with him in the car! But to Floto, with his free and easy rolling-stone ideas, it seemed all right. He was an old friend, they were merely going out to take some snapshots, the children were along. They would be right back. Why, they would even stop at Walter's office and let him know, he said.

"There wouldn't be anything wrong about that, Con," he declared.

But Connie knew that she could not keep it secret. Tongues would begin to wag. Connie, married, and with two children, going out with a strange man! A sky-writer would attract but little more attention.

Connie decided that she would see no more of him; she would dodge him for a few days; if he called up again she would make an excuse and put him off. Then he would be gone. She would rest much easier after he had gone his way, especially after the disturbing look she had seen in his eye the night he had come to dinner, and the note of warning there had been in his voice.

But suddenly and abruptly her plans were wiped away as a new side of the situation developed—an alarming one.

It happened two days after the telephone call. Connie was alone in the house. Mrs. Webb had gone to see the pastor of her church to discuss with him the next meeting of the Foreign Missions Board, which she was interested in, and Connie had sat down to rest. The twins were out in the back yard chasing a bear, when suddenly Connie heard steps coming up the front walk. Floto.

"Hullo, Connie!" he called. He thought he would pop in a minute. Had worked all morning, sun almost blistered him, up against the side of the billboard like he was, gave him sort of a headache, and so he thought he'd take an afternoon off. People didn't appreciate you if you worked too hard for them, he'd found that out. So he'd gone for a walk, and long as he was in the neighborhood he just thought he'd drop in and say howdy-do.

"It's sure hot." He wiped his forehead.

He looked around.

"Your mother-in-law, is she home?"

Connie explained where Mrs. Webb had gone.

"All on the lonesome, are you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's good, better than I expected. We can have a nice litte chin. Of course, we couldn't the other night, with everybody around. How are you, anyway, kid?"

Kid!

Could she shake up a glass of lemonade or something? he asked. It was just awfully hot. He mopped his forehead again.

Connie went to the kitchen to prepare the ice—she would get out of his presence and collect her thoughts —but in a moment he appeared in the door. Sure was a nice little kitchen. Connie had put on a brightly colored rubberized apron which she wore when she had to do some kitchen task for the twins, and now his eyes moved over her.

Say, she looked pretty nice herself. Sure did. She always had, for that matter; hadn't let herself go like lots of girls when they slipped their finger inside the little old gold band.

"Let me do the squeezing," he said, and taking the lemons from her began to crush them on the serrated glass cutter. Did she remember how they used to do things in the old days? Say, that was living. *Um-um!* He gave a little grunt.

In a moment he tried to put his arm around her.

"Here's something I'd rather squeeze."

Connie moved away, a little crying in her heart. What should she do?

"Don't do that again. You know that this can never go on."

That wasn't bad, he declared, just a little squeezing, especially after—well, after the old days. "The old days!" How she hated it, and continually he repeated it.

"How can I get rid of him?" a little voice in Connie cried over and over. What if Mrs. Webb came?

They were now again in the living room. Floto sat half in and half out of the chair, as he always seemed to do, one leg lopped over the side, his trousers drawn

up until his flesh showed. He kept looking at her as he talked, while he swished the lemonade in his glass in an effort to dissolve all the sugar. Fishing out a slice of lemon, he tore it open, ate the soft part and dropped the rind back.

There was a noise in the kitchen, as if a coal truck had backed too far. The twins. Connie rushed to the door. They must not come in, must not see Floto. It seemed that Albert insisted on being the bear all the time and wouldn't stop being the bear at all and Allen ought to 'been it long ago and would mamma make him play right? Connie straightened out the terrible tangle and got the twins into the back yard again.

Now her mind was made up. She would send Floto away, whether he liked it or not.

As gently as she could, but firmly, she told him that he must go—especially after the way he had tried to kiss her in the kitchen. Those days were over. It was an insult and he ought to have known it.

"I'm sorry now that I invited you to come here at all," she said. "I thought you were more of a gentleman than that."

Why, he thought he *was* a gentleman—especially after the old days. Was she going to try to high-hat him?

Connie's indignation rose. This could not go on. She must get rid of him, now, once and for all.

"I'm going to ask you to leave," she declared, her voice trembling. "And I don't want you to come back, either."

Say, now, that was no way to act, gettin' her back

up over nothing. He paused; his half-raillery was gone. He came closer and the look she had seen the night of the dinner was again in his eyes.

"I'm not going to push myself on you, Con, you needn't worry about that, but there's two sides to this here. I want to tell you something. It's this way. You see, I've been playing in a bit of hard luck lately. You know that, or I wouldn't be spreading paint for any man that ever wore pants. You remember that fella I spoke of?—him and I are working out a system together."

Connie understood it only vaguely. In Greenwich Village he had talked of "systems."

Well, now, he continued, he sure had it—a dead open-and-shut system, not a hole in it. The idea was brand new, something that had never been tried before, and he could put it over as sure as shooting. But he was short of money—yeh, same old trouble he used to have in G. V. If she would lend him the money, he would make a killing and give it back to her, maybe with a little present on the side. She was to understand, he said, that it was just a loan.

"About a hundred dollars," he said, deliberately. "It ougthn't to pinch you, sittin' as pretty as you are." He waved a hand over the house. "Oil-burner and everything. You won't miss it. Listen. It'll only take a few days and you'll get it back with something sticking to it, maybe. I'm going to be here in Junction City some time yet—maybe a coupla weeks—so I'll have it back long before that time. The beauty of our scheme," he enthused, "is that we get the money quick.

You see, it's the ponies. You make big money and, if you hit it right, you make it quick."

Connie's heart beat heavily. Lend him money. This would mean that she would have to see him again, other people would suspect. Suppose he lost the money. Then he would want more. Where would it end?

"Listen. I don't want to be, y'know, pushin' about this, but I've simply got to have it."

Blackmail. Nothing else! The request was polite, there was no threat of what would happen if he did not get the money, but blackmail was the portent of it.

Connie sat motionlessly before him, unable to say anything. Once, when she had been a child, she had seen a cat climb a tree and work its way out on a limb where a bird sat half hypnotized staring back into the creature's eyes. Then the cat had made a leap. . . . And so now she thought of herself, sitting helplessly, unable to move, staring back into the fixed eyes.

"I know it knocks the wind out of you," he said as he rose to go, "but it isn't so bad, really it isn't. Think it over a few days, then call me up."

At the door he turned.

"Good-by, Con. Sleep on it and you'll feel different."

He was gone.

Connie thought of going to Walter and making an open confession, but, no! She could not do that, especially now that she had been driven into danger. Intensely she wished she had told him before they were married or at the time he had made his own confession

to her. But would it have been for the best? Would there not always have been a thin, impenetrable wall between them? Her mind went over it again and again, and she wondered how other women, who had similar problems, had solved them.

She thought of how she could make the confession. When closing time at the office came, she could go to get him in the car and then, fabricating some excuse, could take him into the country where they would be safe from interruption—maybe on a picnic supper. They could go to Lovers' Leap, where they had walked and talked before they were engaged, and there together, on an automobile seat on the grass, she could tell him all. She could picture the shock it would be to Walter, the idealistic and idolizing; could see the dumb look of amazement on his face. His Connie, his wife! He might forgive her; he would not be the kind to throw it up to her, nor to torture her with it the rest of her life. They would continue to live together, but something fine, something sacred in their relationship, would be gone. She had heard the phrase, "The dust would be gone from the butterfly's wing," and now it came back to her. They would be like so many couples he knew who find it inconvenient to be together, who never speak to each other when there is anyone else to talk to, who never meet each other's eyes with a smile, who have no tender graces and sentiments for each other. No! no! they couldn't, they shouldn't live that kind of a life.

She thought of that stone wall in Walter, the firm, unyielding belief that one who has once committed a

sin can never be quite clean. The idea was fixed in his mind, as it is in the minds of thousands. Others, more progressive, knew that often sin is not weakness of character, not the decay of some moral fabric, but the child of chance. They saw it in a wider sweep, from an intellectual, Puritan-freed scope, but Walter had always lived in a small town, thought as a small town, and implanted in him were the narrow views of his mother. No, Connie could not hope to appeal to him and expect him to change. She would only crash into Plymouth Rock.

She must find some other way out.

Connie's mother lived in Kansas City, and she probably could get the hundred dollars from her mother, but that would be only the beginning. There would be other calls; they might keep up for years. Then, some day, sooner or later. . . .

If Floto would only leave town; if, in some way, she could get him to move on, he would soon forget about her and the danger would be over. Maybe, she thought, if she could put him off a few days, then his work would be finished and he would have to go. And then she remembered that he had said he would be in Junction City for at least two weeks. She could not possibly hope to evade him for that length of time.

A plan came to her.

Floto had said that the headquarters of his company were in St. Louis, and he had mentioned the name of the big boss, as he called him, and after a time the name came back to her—Mr. Katzmeier. She would go to Mr. Katzmeier and get him to transfer Floto to

some other section. She would explain that Floto had annoyed her and had threatened her; she would make herself her most charming, appeal to Mr. Katzmeier and win him over.

"I know I can do it," she said to herself with determination.

But she did not know the name of the company. It was located in St. Louis; that was all she knew. If she tried long enough she could find it. And then she thought of the car which Floto rode back and forth in from his work. She would see if the name of the company was painted on the car. There followed the matter of finding the garage Floto kept the car in, and then an excuse for entering.

As she walked among the confusion of cars with the proprietor of the garage, she came across it. Buckets of paint were in the car, ropes, tackle; in the front seat was Floto's smeared overalls, and on the seat beside them his spattered, gaping shoes. Connie saw all this as she talked and smiled with the proprietor. Yes, she would have to have the battery recharged. And then, as she photographed the name of the company, a strange, bubbling lightness danced in her heart.

"Yes, I'll be back in a day or two with the battery," she declared. "You have the largest garage in town now, haven't you?"

But the proprietor hadn't. There were two larger. In fact, his was next to the smallest.

Connie was gone.

The lie. That was the hardest of all—and to tell it to Walter. To tell Walter that her mother had called

up by long distance and wanted Connie to come to see her! Never had Connie indulged in the myriad evasions and half-truths with which so many wives smooth their domestic road. Some deep, innate sense of honesty and integrity kept her from stooping to such subterfuge. Often it would have been easier to gloss over the truth, or neatly to dodge it, but instead she had always faced it squarely—in all things except in the One Big Thing. And possibly it was because of this one deceit that she had been all the more painfully honest in the lesser things. It was this strict, unwavering honesty which so endeared her to Walter. It was beyond Walter's comprehension that Connie would do anything to deceive him. That she could do such a thing never even entered the fringe of his consciousness, and that evening, as Connie put her head on his shoulder and looked up into his eyes and told him that her mother had called up by long distance, her heart cried within her.

"I'm going to love him more than ever," she told herself. "I'm going to be a better wife to him." And in her heart pounded a pæan of appreciation.

"Of course you must go, Connie," declared Walter, as she hesitated. "Dear child, I do hope there isn't anything serious the matter. And rustle up some flowers for her in my name."

"You darling!" cried Connie, and kissed him in a frenzy of devotion.

The next day a frightened, determined Connie walked into the confused, swirling maze of an office building in St. Louis, and looked with a great pretense

of confidence at the wall directory. She must not let anybody suspect how frightened she was, how heavily her heart beat. It had been years since Connie had been in a large city, and now, as she found the number of the office and stepped into the elevator, the people seemed so intent, so sure of themselves, so confident that it made her tremble. How far this hustling, bustling world was from the peace and quiet of Junction City!

"What if I should fail?" she thought.

And then she composed herself. "I know I won't," she said.

Walter, she knew, had suspected nothing. Often she had gone to see her mother in Kansas City, and Walter had not given it another thought. But instead of going to Kansas City Connie had turned off to St. Louis.

She found the office, hesitated before the door a moment, gathering up her courage, and then walked in with what seemed a composed, tranquil air. A girl sat at a desk marked "Information," folding up seemingly endless circulars; two quick deft movements and they were folded; another movement and a stamp was rubbed across a damp sponge and the envelope deposited in a basket. On the walls were rows of photographs of billboards; some showed plain billboards and some showed more ambitious and quite grand billboards with figures cut out and extending over the edges. On display stands were small miniature billboards set in imitation country backgrounds, and around them were miniature trees with cows and

horses grazing, while a train rushed along filled with people gazing out the windows with an air of intense interest.

The girl at the reception desk looked up.

"Do you wish to see somebody?"

"Yes," returned Connie with all the composure she could summon. How calm she was outside! How her heart churned! A fresh fear rushed over her. What if, at the last moment, she should not get to see him? What if he were out of town? "I wish to see Mr. Katzmeier," she returned, calmly.

The girl's eyes took her in with the quickness of a photographic plate. What was it about? Was she selling something?

"It's personal," returned a strange, quiet person who spoke for Connie. "I have nothing to sell," and she gave a friendly, disarming smile.

The girl disappeared behind a frosted partition; there was a murmur of voices.

"This way."

Connie had the feeling, as she entered, of seeing a crowded office filled by a fat, slightly greasy-looking man sitting behind a row of pearl push buttons. On the wall was a huge map specked with pins, with heads of different colors. Around the cities the pin heads were gathered in clusters, with here and there a solitary trail leading off into another state. These were, as she surmised, the locations of different strings of billboards. The fat, slightly greasy-looking man, enthroned behind the push buttons, was Mr. Katzmeier. Mr. Katzmeier was a great success in his chosen busi-

ness; he had probably defaced nature with more hideous billboards than any other man living.

"And I am just in my prime," he often said. It was his ambition to have a billboard on every lovely drive in the land. "The field it ain't been schratched yet," he would enthuse.

As he sat in his chair he seemed not only to fill it, but to overflow onto the desk. In his mouth was the chewed end of a dead cigar, and as he dictated, the ponderous mountain of meat sat tilted back in his chair, slowly chewing at his cigar and barking out his words. His hands were fat and round, with tufts of black hair growing on the last joints, next to the hand. And on one of his fingers a diamond flashed.

"Yes-s, vhat is it? Vhat d'you vant?" he asked.

Connie had meant to tell him very calmly about an indignity that Floto had offered her in Junction City, and appeal to him to send Floto away, but now as she saw his thick, heavy face—thicker through the jowls than across his forehead—her speech went whirling.

"I am Mrs. Walter Webb," she explained, "and I am from Junction City and I came to see you about one of your men," she rushed on.

"Aboudt Floto?"

"Yes."

Katzmeier leaned forward. This was a surprise.

Connie moved her chair nearer, all the time a voice within her silently crying, "I must tell it well, must make a good impression on him."

"He's not the kind of man we want around Junction City," she declared. "He stands on the street and

when people—ladies—pass he makes insulting remarks. I'm here representing the Mothers' Club of Junction City," she said on the inspiration of the moment. "We know it's a good deal to ask, Mr. Katzmeier, but couldn't you move him on to some other territory? It'll prejudice the people against the things advertised on your billboards."

Katzmeier leaned back in his chair, his beady eyes fastened on Connie's tense face. The Mothers' Club —*hmm!* How many members were there? Er—had they signed a petition? They hadn't—and yet they had sent her all the way to St. Louis! Floto! He had never had a complaint against him before. He was one of their good men. "Yust vhat did he say?" persisted Katzmeier.

Connie hesitated, her heart clamoring. It was so much more difficult than it had seemed when she had first thought of it.

Katzmeier waved aside her words with a thick, fat hand. He was sorry, but he couldn't take one of his men off a job just because of that. Besides, Floto would soon be through there, anyway.

The silent clamoring within her grew greater; now she must tell him.

"It's about myself," she confessed. "I—I knew Floto before he came to our town." Her eyes went down for a moment and then they came up again while she told the sorrowful tale. Now and then, as she told it, she swallowed slightly. At last, the ordeal was over. "Don't you see," she cried, "he's trying to blackmail me! Surely, Mr. Katzmeier, you wouldn't

have a man in your organization who would do that, would you?"

No, of course he wouldn't. Naturally he wouldn't. He was glad that she had brought it straight to him. But of course—and his beady eyes again went over her carefully—it would upset things to shift one of their best men to some other job. "In fact," he added, ponderously, "I t'ink I'd call him our *best* man. Fine on figger work. Anybody can letter, but they can't all get the real feelin' into figgers." Pausing, he looked at her craftily. "Of course, I could move him, but, y'understand, there would be considerable loss to the company—gettin' behind on contracts and so on. Y'understand that, don't you?" he repeated. "Vell, I t'ink mebbe I could shift him to anudder location for —vell"—his piercing eyes read her again—"I vas going to say four hundredt, but I'll make it t'ree, and I von't tell him vhy. I'll wire him tonight and get him out of there before you landt back, that's vat I'll do." He waved a pudgy hand at the row of push buttons. "I'll shift him to the Omaha-Lincoln sthring."

Connie felt a dizziness. Three hundred dollars! Never had she had three hundred dollars at one time in her life.

She tried to make herself most agreeable, tried desperately to find some ground on which to meet him. On his desk was a picture of two children and she guessed they were his own. "They're yours, aren't they? I have twins!" she exclaimed. "Here is their picture." She showed the picture with pathetic eager-

ness. "I love them so. Can't you understand?" she appealed. "I want to protect them."

Sure he could; he loved his kits, too, but money vas money. Besides, there was the board of directors. He'd like to do it, but he must show a profit to the directors; they were a very demanding body, he let it be understood.

"Couldn't you do it without any money, Mr. Katzmeier? Please," she sobbed and seized the fat hand with its blazing diamond.

He would like to, personally, but there vas that terrible board. He shouldn't—considering all the work it would be—but he'd do it for t'ree hundredt dollars.

It might as well have been a thousand. And now as she looked at the calculating eyes she began to realize that this would not be the end of things. She would be in his power; he might be as bad as Floto.

She rose. "I—I can't do it, Mr. Katzmeier," she said.

She walked heavily through the littered office; the girl at the information desk was still piling envelopes into the basket. There was a great weariness in Connie's heart as she got into the elevator. There was a rush of air, a slight singing in her ears, the distant clank of chains, then the sound of the doors opening.

Connie turned into the street and threaded her way through the moving panorama of people, her mind going over the scene in the office. Suddenly, in the restless, moving, confusion of people, she seemed to see

a familiar figure coming toward her—Avis Templeton —and her heart clamored within her. Avis! Avis! whose eyes were always looking for what they could see. How could Connie explain it? It would get back to Walter that she had been to St. Louis. Connie wished to slip aside, but she advanced steadily, and as the figure came closer she saw that it was not Avis at all, but only some one vaguely resembling her. It was all over in a second, this fear which beat at her heart and which left her knees so curiously sagging, but she realized that she had begun to build ghosts.

Connie went to the Union Station and there she sat, very quiet, very watchful, very weary. When at last it was time for the train, she got on and went to Kansas City, and then to the home of her mother. There would be no danger, now, of anyone finding that she had not been where she said she was going.

When she arrived in Junction City, Walter was at the depot to meet her. Many husbands, immersed in business, would have let her take a taxi, but Walter's faithfulness never failed her. His simple, honest face was the first one that she saw.

"How many years were you gone?" he asked as he kissed her. "We sure missed you. By gracious! you've changed a lot," he declared in his jesting manner. There was a moment of seriousness. How was her mother? Better? Had the flowers helped cheer her up? Then again he was his light self: "Yessir, you're prettier'n ever." And then he put her into the car with the care of a jeweler putting a balance wheel into a lady's Swiss wrist-watch.

When Connie reached home, Walter's mother was not so complimentary.

"Your New York friend has called up a couple of times since you left," she complained. "He kept wanting to know when you would be back. I suppose it's all right, but young people act so differently from what they did in my day."

And with that Mrs. Webb heaved a sigh into a world that hadn't amounted to much for thirty years.

There was a rush, a roar, a merry shouting, and the twins were upon her with their loving, adorable, welcoming arms.

"Oh, you lovey-dovey ducks!" cried Connie in ecstasy.

Chapter Six

IN THE meantime Floto had been making hay. It was easy for Floto to make. He had been, in short, looking 'em over. When Floto arrived in a new town, his first interest was to see, as he put it, what was there. And Floto saw with a calculating and experienced eye.

He liked to take a walk. Dressed in his flashy clothes, wearing spats and carrying a cane, he would saunter up and down the street, now and then giving his cane a twirl, while he saw what was out. After he had found something of interest, he would begin the process of getting acquainted. Sometimes he would walk up and down a dozen times, now and then clearing his throat slightly, and pausing to look in shop windows, or he would go into the ice-cream parlor and take a table adjoining the person he wished to get acquainted with. Pretty soon he would be able to pick up a check that had slipped to the floor, hold open a door, or do some other manly service. A smile, a few words; the next day a few more words—he had started on his hay.

Thus it was that he had first seen Yansca Polin. It had made him rotate his cane quite rapidly.

Yansca Polin was nineteen years old, and an earnest, pretty, and ambitious child, indeed. Yansca's parents

were farmers, one generation from Poland, and lived in a little Polish-German settlement at the far end of the county, where they still kept many of their Old World ways. The other farmers in this neighborhood were wide awake, progressive pushers who farmed with machinery, used trucks, and were up-to-date, but in the little Polish-German settlement they still kept to what the other farmers called "back labor"—that is, they did much of it by sheer physical strength rather than by machinery and improved methods. In the winter-time, when the men from this section came to town, they wore old-fashioned felt boots and greasy round fur caps, and the women wore coats almost as big and cumbersome as the men's and sat stolidly humped up on the floors of the bob-sleds side by side with the men. Sometimes the women took over the lines and drove, while the men got off and walked behind, beating their arms across their breasts.

In this settlement Yansca was born, with dark black hair and bright blue eyes and with Art enthroned in her heart. Queer, it was, that out of this backward, snuff-chewing, almost illiterate settlement should come one so refreshingly pretty and so talented as Yansca.

"She's always been schratchin' marks on papers und walls und every'ting," her father said. "She never work goot in der fields like mein udders."

The country school-teacher had been impressed by Yansca's bold, weird drawings and had brought them to the head of the art department of the state Teachers' College which was located in Junction City, and the latter had asked to see Yansca herself. Yansca was

brought in on the great and exciting trip to see a Professor of Art.

The professor had become interested in the bold, strong, individualistic sketches and had wanted to enter her as a student. But Yansca did not have the meager money even for this, and then the professor had taken up the matter with the Women's Club of Junction City, which each year provided a scholarship for some student particularly worthy. And then, oh, then! Heaven had come down and taken Yansca into its arms, and she had bought a few new clothes and moved to Junction City to become an artist. Oh, the wonderful days! Now she could make all the drawings she wished, no cows to milk, no pigs to feed, and so much clean, white canvas.

Yansca, when the mood was upon her, liked to take her easel, her wonderful folding stool, and her little color-box, and wander off in any direction that called. First here, then there; sometimes, during a whole afternoon, she wouldn't open her box; possibly the next time she went out she would paint furiously, enveloped in a rosy halo.

One evening as Floto stood in front of the hotel, smoking and looking for what he could see, he saw Yansca coming down the street, Yansca in her fresh youth and loveliness, still unused to the town, walking toward him. To her it was a fine, friendly city, for had it not raised the money for her to go to art school? The people were her friends. Had they not helped her escape the farm? Floto's eyes rested upon her blooming beauty, and as she came opposite him he

smiled. Yansca, so recently from the settlement, returned the smile.

After she had gone by, Floto edged up to a neighbor.

"Who is she?" he asked.

He straightened up, when he was told, and smacked his cane against his leg, while he stared after her. A moment later he hooked his cane on his arm, searched in his pocket and drew out a crumpled cigarette, which he carefully straightened and lit, and then slowly began to walk down the street behind her—Yansca, so young and pretty, the girl who had smiled back. . . . One evening as she was going into the movie show, he managed to hold open the door for her. His acquaintance had begun.

One day as Floto sat on his swinging cradle, before the billboard, he was surprised to see a girl walking across the pasture. A girl. And as she came nearer he saw that it was Yansca. Yansca out with her easel and paint-box. Floto scrambled down, his hat came off, and he proceeded to make himself entertaining.

"Hello, Miss Polin! Say! this is some little surprise."

Yansca was interested. He was the first man she had ever seen from New York. This romantic figure traveled over the country, lived in hotels, saw fine people.

"I'll show you how it's done," explained Floto, and displayed his miniature key board, marked off into squares, and he showed her how he painted the same lines and duplicated the colors in an enlarged scale on the billboard.

Yansca was fascinated, and to her this little peep behind the scenes was wonderful. Here was a person who had studied art in New York, who knew personally the great artists and who called them by their first names. Floto looked at Yansca's sketches and criticized them for her.

"This is the way I'd do that," he said of one of them, and made a deft line.

"You really ought to go to New York," he declared.

At last Yansca gathered up her easel and went on her way again. It had been very pleasant indeed.

Floto had begun to make hay.

In the meantime, Connie had her problems. Floto, Connie told herself, must not call up over the telephone. She might be alone when he called; then it would not be so bad; but on the other hand, Mrs. Webb, beginning to grow more suspicious, might be present. Even though Connie were noncommittal and tried to make it a yes-and-no; is-that-so? conversation, Mrs. Webb would know who it was.

Connie could imagine the scene: Mrs. Webb in the kitchen, creeping about as silently as a mouse, a tea towel poised in her hand, listening like an Indian on the warpath. The set, fixed, bug-like stare in her pop eyes, the slightly complaining manner—how well Connie knew the traits.

"That wasn't your New York friend, was it?" she would inquire, mildly.

In her quiet, devastating way Mrs. Webb managed to put Floto outside the pale of human consideration.

Unconsciously she resented that Connie had had more advantages than had her son, and that Connie had come from a family higher in the social scale than her own. Walter had never been so far away from home as New York. Like most small-town people, Mrs. Webb unconsciously resented New York. And now Connie, who had not only been to New York but had lived and studied there, had turned up with this doubtful specimen of the city's greatness. It was more than she could stomach.

"That New York friend of yours"—that was the only term Mrs. Webb now used in speaking of him. It was as if she had said, "That jail-bird friend of yours."

However quiet and prosaic Connie managed to make the conversation sound, it would that evening get to Walter. Maybe at dinner. She could see Mrs. Webb the family telephone, sitting silently on her side of the table, peckishly eating, now and then clearing her throat, eating a little more, clearing her throat again. It had been a trying day, she would begin. The twins had been worse than usual; they had been bad right out on the street where everybody could see them, especially Albert, and then she would give Albert a look meant to purge all sin and insubordination from his soul. *Hemm*—she would clear her throat again. But, on the other hand, Allen had been a nice, manly little fellow, except at lunch, when he had jumped up three times from the table. Now wasn't he sorry that she had to tell his daddy about the way he had acted? Mrs. Webb would then take up the matter of the tele-

phone. It had been ringing all day. One of the calls was from that New York friend of Connie's. Connie could see her as Mrs. Webb glanced furtively at Walter. *Hemm*—of course, it was *hemm*—all right for him to call Connie up—only—well—and then her voice would trail off into nothing.

No, Connie told herself, Floto must not begin to call up at the house. What if he should call up when Walter was there? Or worse, what if he should come around when Walter was there—coolly saunter in? He was capable of it.

And then, as Connie turned it over and over endlessly in her mind, she decided to go to Floto and throw herself on his mercy. She would tell him how she loved her husband, how precious the twins were; she would tell some of her favorite stories about them—there was the one about Albert. One day she had shown Albert a yellow color and asked him what it was. Albert did not know. "That's orange," she explained, and showed him an orange to impress upon him the shade. Then she had shown him another yellow, still lighter in color. "What's that?" she asked. "Banana," Albert had replied. That would appeal to Floto, who dealt in colors; he would laugh. Then she would make Floto see that he was a brute to break up her home. After all, Floto had many worthy instincts. He was weak, he was vacillating, but still he had some good traits. There was the time he had sent flowers to the hospital for the little boy who had been run down on the street.

But where could she see him? She could wait until

Mrs. Webb went out and then call him up by telephone, or she could go to the drug store (dangerous as it was), or to the booth at the Country Club, and then call him. But it would be unsatisfactory; there would be the shouting which the small locally-constructed-and-owned telephone line (always so full of whims) so often required. Somebody might be listening. No, she could do better if she saw him face to face. But where could she see him in this town of a million eyes? She might go to the hotel and meet him in the lounge, but she would be seen; it would get back to Walter.

And then, as she tumbled it about in her mind, a plan came to her. She would go to where Floto was painting the billboard and talk to him there. There would be less danger, they would be free from interruption, she could sway him with her appeal. The more she thought about it, the better she liked the idea.

She must act at once—today. And then Connie remembered that this was Thursday, when the arrangement about the car was different. Usually Walter walked to the office in the morning, or sometimes one of the neighbors picked him up and took him down to work, but on Thursday was the sacred Round Table luncheon at the Country Club, when, rain or shine, Walter took the car to the office with him and left it standing in the Square, so that when twelve o'clock came he could jump in and dash away to the weekly oasis. It was the high spot of the week for Walter, when some eighteen or twenty of the town's leading spirits got together, turned the hour glass upside

down, and while the sands trickled, let business look out for itself.

At half past one the sociable Walter would return from the luncheon, with one or two others in the car with him, and then would leave the car drawn up on the north side of the Square. At five or half past, when his day was done and the ponderous leather books were locked into the steel vault for the night, he would get into the car and return home. But during the time in between, the car would not be used, unless Walter had to go out to see some one about an abstract, or some detail of business. Connie thought it over and she decided to go downtown, tell Walter that she was going to use the car, and then see Floto and put up her appeal. She had a key to the car, but it was customary, before either of them used the car, to let the other know.

And so now, as Connie dressed, she decided that she would make the excuse to Walter that she wanted the car to call on old Mrs. Hooper. Old Mrs. Hooper had worked in the home of Connie's father when Connie was a child, and when Connie and Walter had married, Mrs. Hooper had come faithfully each Monday to get the washing—seemingly no older than she had been when Connie had been a child. But rheumatiz had got her, as Mrs. Hooper phrased it, and now she could not come on Monday morning with her old, dilapidated, rickety, one-horse spring-wagon and carry the bundle of clothes out, drop them into the wagon, climb heavily over the wheel, cluck to the horse, and go weaving and rattling down the street, to

return on Tuesday, the weather being what it ought to be, with the clothes no longer in a bundle, but in a big wicker basket. Connie always had a cup of coffee for Mrs. Hooper, who would take the cup in her twisted, gnarled hands and suck down the coffee with honest appreciation. Mrs. Hooper now lived alone, in a small, unpainted house at the edge of Junction City, in the direction of Lovers' Leap, querulous and complaining, for she was not a lovely character.

"How are you today, Mrs. Hooper?" Connie would ask, as Mrs. Hooper poured her coffee into her saucer.

"Porly, real porly, Connie," old Mrs. Hooper always said.

Mrs. Hooper had been porly, real porly, for years. Her physical inability was one of the satisfactions of the old woman's life, and Connie wondered if, by some divine miracle, Mrs. Hooper suddenly found herself whole and hearty again, it wouldn't really be a great disappointment to her. It was her bait for sympathy, and who is so flawless as not to want that soothing salve? Most people found old Mrs. Hooper so unpleasant and garrulous about her rheumatiz that they did not go to see her. But some tender spot in Connie's heart sent her, now and then, to call on the acid old woman. Always, on such visits, Connie was glad to get away from her. Connie frequently made up her mind not to go back again, but when the immediate picture of old Mrs. Hooper, sitting in her rocking-chair and going into the minutest details of her symptoms had departed from her mind, a succeeding picture of

the old woman's loneliness would come back to her and Connie would return. And now, as Connie thought it over, she decided she would tell Walter that she wanted the car to go to see old Mrs. Hooper. He would accept it at once and never give it a second thought.

Walter would be sitting in his big, old-fashioned, hair-stuffed swivel chair, which seemed ready any moment to pitch him into the middle of the floor. As she came in his face would light up. This smile of welcome was one of the precious things of her life. Many husbands, Connie knew, would let their wives come into their office, or meet them on the street, with the imperturbable complacency of the Sphinx, but this fixed eye and unresponsive gaze was no part of warm, generous Walter. When Connie came into his office it was an event, and always Walter warmed her welcome with a smile.

"Of course, darling," Walter would say, when she told him she was going to see old Mrs. Hooper. "But don't let the old lady fill you up with her troubles until you come back limp as a rag."

How the knife would turn in her heart, as Walter's unsuspicious eyes looked into hers. And now as Connie walked along she experienced the same poignant regret, the same self-shame that she had felt when she had let Walter think she was going to Kansas City to see her mother.

In that mysterious, complex, and incalculable chamber called her mind she saw herself as she had been, before Floto had suddenly dropped out of the clouds —only two weeks ago. Was it possible—only two

weeks ago? It seemed a season. Her life had been going pleasantly and quietly along, and suddenly that evil omen had flapped before her. Before he had arrived she had not had the slightest idea of telling Walter a lie; and now today this would make two.

When Connie came in sight of the brick courthouse, set in the middle of the Square, her heart began to beat rapidly. The old red building, planted in the dot center of the county, was not just a collection of bricks, a slate roof, and a hundred tons of cement, but a personality. There it stood—red, friendly, and battered—with a steeple which, when Connie was a child, certainly reached to heaven; but now, in the light of greater experiences, it was only a clock and bell tower. Pigeons roosted in this steeple, and as one walked along the street they could be heard billing and cooing. There they sat, lazily talking things over. One of the pigeons turned from the others, walked with curious, sidling, half-hitching steps along the edge of the cornice, stared into the street below, and then, satisfied that all was well with the world, came sidling back again. As Connie came up, the clock struck. The pigeons rose as they always did, circled a few times, and then came back again. In an hour the clock would strike again and again the pigeons would write their long loops in the air and then come back to their dreams. As Connie looked up at the pigeons, sitting so peacefully in the sun, she suddenly wished she were one of them. Funny thought to have.

Connie mounted the worn steps to the courthouse, entered, and went down the high, echoing hall, flagged

with white and with pale-blue stones, alternating like a huge checkerboard. She stood hesitating outside Walter's door, intensely disliking to go in, for now she would have to tell him the lie. But she could not stand waiting at the door, like a child; people would be passing.

Taking command of herself, she opened the door, and as she opened it she again felt the contrast the room bore to the others in the building. How well she knew the other rooms, all similar in size and shape to Walter's—the careless, littered appearance they had, the I-guess-it's-good-enough look left by a succession of officeholders. Men's rooms, careless rooms, smoke-and-tobacco-stained rooms. On the walls were advertising calendars from concerns publishing law books, ledger-manufacturing companies, powder concerns. Here and there on the walls, where old-fashioned telephones had once been fastened, were figures and calculations made by people now, no doubt, deservedly in their graves. Against the walls were ancient silvered radiators, with small pails hanging under the valves in case, during the winter, the radiators developed eccentricities. Also in the rooms were rusted stoves squatting on islands of zinc, with long gray rusted pipe straggling across the room and disappearing into the wall. Underneath, where the pipes entered the wall, rain and soot had written their fantastic signatures.

But there was none of this makeshift negligence about Walter's office. The cheap advertising pictures had come down; the stove had been taken up and

carried to that dim and mysterious region known only to the janitor, the basement; the radiator had been regilded; no rusting pail waited the moist sputterings of January. The walls had been repainted, new desks had found their way into the room, and about it all was an air of neatness and efficiency.

Walter sat at his desk in his black office coat; near him, listening eagerly to every word he said, was a farmer. Some years before, during the reign of another recorder, there had been a mistake in entering the deed to the man's land, and now it was in a tangle. Walter was straightening it out for him. The man's huge, grown, work-hardened hand lay on the desk, clenched intensely. For years the man had toiled in the boiling, blistering suns of summer and in the bitter, biting blizzards of winter to buy his little farm, and now its title was in jeopardy. If the farm could be saved, Walter would be the one who could do it.

"Will you do that for me, Mr. Webb?" asked the browned, bent farmer. " 'Mandy and the kids—well, I left them pretty upset and cryin' some when I come away."

Connie sensed the tragedy that was taking place on some bleak, lonesome farm; and Walter would be the man to solve it.

She decided not to interrupt him, and, turning, went quickly out to the car parked between the slant, parallel white lines, and in a moment was on her way.

A very frightened, very calm-looking Connie sped quickly through the streets, first in the direction of old Mrs. Hooper's, and then—when she was safely out

of the business section—toward the Arkoe road. Here it was, in the direction of Lovers' Leap, that Floto was painting the billboard.

The land in this section was flat, almost a floor, scraped and pared and holystoned by the grim, relentless glaciers which had marched out of the icy north. Here and there, like tracks left by some mighty giant, were mounds of gravel, spotted and specked over the country as if the mighty giant had been some whimsical child. Growing out of the flat land was a gently sloping hill, rising from one side like a great ramp, and then at the other abruptly breaking off into a cliff. A hundred feet below was a tangle of rocks; bushes grew in profusion—the berries seemed to be ripest there—and then the flat, rich land began again. Rather unusual, it was, this quick, abrupt promontory on this level, floor-like farming land. Legend had it that once an Indian maid and her red lover had leaped from it, when this section of the country was a happy hunting-ground. A later legend was that when the country was first settling up, after the covered wagon had gone clucking on farther into the West, a white girl had sought the comfort of the rocks below. Anyway, the name Lovers' Leap had stuck. That ambitious and enterprising body, the Chamber of Commerce, had made a great deal of it—it was one of the town's fourteen beauty spots—and recently the cliff had risen to the dignity of being included in the automobile guide book, along with the farmhouse where Jesse James had once stayed overnight.

As Connie whirled past she smiled. Once it had

been a most romantic and stirring spot—Lovers' Leap. Even the name carried a glamour. And she herself, when she had been in high school, had written a long Hiawatha-like poem setting forth the Indian legend.

She met a few cars; a few white, well-painted farmhouses slipped by, a few cows raised their heads and stared hazily at her over the fence, and then the billboard rose before her. Floto's old mud-spattered, paint-specked car was drawn up in the field, and here, at noon, Floto sat in his smeared overalls, eating lunch and reading a paper. Floto, in a cradle, now dangled against the side of the billboard.

Intensely now she wished to turn back, and again it all seemed a horrible dream—that she, Connie Webb, should be out in a field, a little distance from the highway, calling on a man on such a mission. It might happen to others, but not to her.

She had almost reached him before he saw her.

Floto took hold of the ropes of his swaying platform, gave them a tug, and down the platform moved, like an elevator. But Connie saw that his debonair manner was gone. Nothing could survive the specked and spattered paint suit buttoned to his chin and the long-billed cap pulled down over his eyes. "If I don't wear it, the sun shining against the board knocks my eyes out," Floto explained.

"Yes, this is some surprise," he repeated, removing his cap with a flourish. This flourish, this gesture, seemed at the moment to be all that was left of the dashing young blade who had once attracted her.

"Say, Con, it's mighty fine of you to come out here and fix it up for me. You ain't going to regret it. I know I can make a killing and then I'll be through with this stuff." He waved his hand contemptuously at the bright billboard. "When I make my killing I'll send it back to you, honest I will," he declared with the fervor that always accompanied such a promise. "I've got a tip that's going to give papa a gold arm."

He continued to rattle on.

Now she must speak, and she felt a ringing in her head and had the strange feeling that the person who must respond was not herself at all.

"Listen, Ed," she said, suddenly friendly. "I want to talk things over with you. I haven't got the money. You see, it's this way." She must stumble her way through the words, must make him see how unhappy she was, throw herself on his mercy. He must understand that he would break up her home.

But before she could begin she heard the words:

"What you mean, you ain't got it, Con?" No, she couldn't mean that—anybody who was sittin' as pretty as she was—wouldn't help a fella out of a pinch for a measly little hundred dollars—when he was goin' to give it back to her with something stickin' to it.

Connie saw the rage rising in him, the sudden senseless flight of temper which sometimes seized him, and a little frightened part of her mind told her that it would be useless to attempt to appeal to his finer instincts. He had none. The money; that was all he wanted.

"I haven't got it yet," she heard the person who spoke for her say.

"But you will have it?"

"Yes," said the same strange person.

"When?"

"As soon as I c-can."

Well, that was better, but he must have it because he had written Jim that he was going to send it.

"You don't want to fail me, Connie," he declared, and Connie caught the threat in his tone. "I don't want to be snooty about it, but"—and the grim note crept back into his voice—"well, I've simply got to have it."

In a few moments Connie found herself gliding back along the cement highway toward Junction City, a strange befuddlement gripping her, knowing now that he would stop at nothing.

Connie drew the car into place where she had found it and looked up in surprise at the gilt hands of the clock. Not an hour had passed since she had got into the car, and yet how long it seemed. As she looked the clock struck five; the pigeons rose and circled around again, and again she had the same vague wish that she were one of them.

She went up the steps and down the white and pale-blue checkerboard to Walter's door. Walter, when she opened the door, was not sitting in his big, old-fashioned chair at his desk, but was in the little, semi-private room with two or three other men. She knew from their voices that they were other county officers and supposed they were going over some matter of

business, and then, unconsciously, as she began to patch sentences together, she understood that they were talking about Nettie. Walter himself had seen Art Looker slipping into Nettie's house when Nettie's husband was not there. The other men were willing to condone it—she should be given warning—but Walter had no such generous attitude.

"It's all right to say that," declared Walter, "but we don't *want* such a woman in our office." She was cheap and common, and every time he looked at her he didn't want to think she was that kind. "I don't want her around me, that's all," he finished, and Connie caught that Puritan relentlessness in his voice. "My wife comes in here. Do you suppose I want her to meet that woman? I don't think you men do, either, if you think it over."

They were the words one might expect from a Fourth of July orator. There was little or no logic behind them, certainly no psychology, no understanding. It was the attitude of another generation, and again Connie thought of the New England father facing his erring daughter.

But, as they talked, the others overruled Walter. She must be given another trial.

Chairs were moved, the men were getting up to leave. Connie slipped out and down the hall unseen, a strange trembling in her knees. And now suddenly, intensely, she wanted to make him understand about Nettie—vain, shallow, weak, human Nettie.

After the men had gone she returned.

Walter welcomed her warmly. He'd be through in

just two shakes of a sheep's tail. How was everything, anyway? It was nice, indeed, to have her drop in and ride home with him. And then Connie understood he had not known that she had used the car and that he thought she had come to ride home with him. This simple faith, this simple, utter belief in her as he bustled about, closing drawers and putting things to right, touched her poignantly.

"Come on, Connie," he cried as they closed the door, "we'll push some fresh air into our lungs before we go home. Come on—we'll take a spin."

Smiling, her heart breaking, she followed him out.

Chapter Seven

CONNIE, during the succeeding days, wanted to flee. She thought of getting Walter to take her and the twins in the car to one of the Minnesota lakes on a vacation. They had done that once before and it had been a heavenly time. But this was Walter's busy season and she knew that he could not get away, even for a day. A calmer, clearer self pointed out the foolishness of it. Even if, by some miracle, she and Walter and the twins succeeded in getting away, it could be only for a brief time. Then they would have to return. . . .

Connie began to grow nervous, she who had always been so free from nerves. She woke easily at night; furtive shadows lurked in the hall. Sometimes, when the twins in the next room called out, she was afraid to go to them. She was amazed at herself.

She no longer wanted to go out socially; instead of meeting people, she wished to avoid them. One day, as she was going down the street, she saw Mr. Givens coming toward her. Mr. Givens was the town promoter of small, inconsequential schemes. He was talkative, with a curious, persistent way of prying into a person's business as he stared hazily at you with pale, watery eyes. He had developed to a high degree the art of worming information out of people. It was good for

his promoting; you could never tell when y'could use the information.

"Well, how are you today? You seem to be going some place," he would say, as his eyes moved questioningly over the person. Nowhere special, he supposed, and there he would stand quizzing and probing and prying until at last he had got what he wanted. Usually Connie stopped to talk to the old man, for she felt that he was lonely, but now as she saw him coming toward her, she turned aside without speaking to him.

"I just can't talk to him today," she said to herself.

Connie complained of being tired, she who had always been resilient as a rubber ball. The twins began to be trying. One day, as she saw them go out of the house, she sighed with relief. And yet, as they trudged away, she loved them more deeply and consumingly than ever. Queer.

Little things happened. As she was straightening up her bureau, she picked up a hair-pin to drop it into a baby shoe of Albert's, which had been processed and bronzed and was now used as a bureau catch-all. The little keep-sake had been on her bureau since he was an infant, and she had become so accustomed to it that she no longer noticed it. But now as she dropped the pin into the wrinkled, lovely shoe, tears came welling up and burned in her eyes.

"Oh, you darling!" she cried, and there stood Connie with the shoe in her hands, petting it. Strange

thing to do—suddenly to pet a shoe which she had seen every day for years.

She could not sleep at night, and would lie in her bed beside Walter's, listening to his deep, regular breathing, going over and over the situation. Maybe something would happen, maybe some hand of Fate would intervene. She had read it in stories—where a wife was confronted by a man out of her past and at the right moment she found that he was a jail bird, or a bigamist, and had him hustled away to the waiting prison. But Floto had never been married; and he was only a petty law-evader who would never do anything bold enough to put him behind walls.

Mrs. Webb began to worry her more and more with her half-complaining, half-critical manner, and with her way of trying to put Connie in the wrong in Walter's eyes. "I must stand it; it's just her way," she would tell herself, and then a few minutes later find herself on the verge of a quarrel with her mother-in-law.

Queer how her feelings about Walter changed—big, hearty, innocent Walter, who saw nothing and suspected nothing. Sometimes a positive hate welled up in her that he was not the kind of a husband to whom she could tell such a thing. Other husbands would accept it. As she thought about it, wild ideas leaped into her mind, ideas which struck and snarled at her. It was like a circus she had seen once where a woman had gone into the cage with lions that were half under her control and half beyond her power. There they were—those fearsome creatures, leaping

when she cracked her whip, retreating when she advanced, but always snarling; now and then a lightning claw struck at her. And now Connie herself seemed to be driving wild, slinking, treacherous ideas, ideas which one moment seemed calm and which the next lashed at her.

Following these spasms of hate came another feeling, a deep, unquenchable yearning to make herself attractive to Walter. She went to the Yehle dry-goods store and indulged in what she called a buying spree. It was an easy thing to indulge in. In fact, it is a profound wonder to a masculine observer that any woman can walk through a store with all its temptations beckoning subtly at her and escape with anything remaining in her purse except the house key.

It was pleasant, indeed, to know that she made a little flutter as she entered the store—Mrs. Walter Webb, wife of the new director of the Country Club, and the leader of the little set whose doings were chronicled daily on the page of the paper marked "Society and Social Notes." It was nice indeed to see Mr. Yehle himself elude a woman determined on pinning him down, to come to her—Mr. Yehle, the proprietor of the store, and who waited on only "special customers." It was nice to hear his cheery greeting and to know that he was being at his best before her. And as she talked easily and gayly, another idea rose and fell in her mind, appearing and disappearing. What would Mr. Yehle say if he knew? But Mr. Yehle didn't know. He was now leaning

over, his knuckles on the counter, smiling. What else, Mrs. Webb?

"We've just got in some new silk underwear. Let me have it shown to you."

He called a clerk and the underwear was displayed. The newest and most expensive silk underwear! Connie had only one or two suits of silk underwear—rather sleazy—and now as she ran her hand over the lovely, expensive fabric, she wanted it deeply and intensely. It was more expensive than she could afford—where would it come from in the budget?—and then her hand passed over it again.

"I'll take four suits," she heard herself say.

After the purchase Mr. Yehle followed her about, his smile playing upon her. Here was something he'd like to show her. "I quite recommend it," he said. Mr. Yehle quite recommended everything in his store.

Mr. Yehle followed her to the car to deposit the snowstorm of boxes and parcels on the rear seat. Connie stared at them in amazement. Had she bought all those things?—and for herself? Now she would have to fly at that budget harder than ever. The budget, that terrible household pest.

When she reached home Mrs. Webb watched her carry the things up the stairs with the astonishment the natives of the Alps must have had when they watched Hannibal march over the mountains with the elephants.

Mrs. Webb cleared her throat.

"I see you've been downtown trading." It was as

if she had said, "I see you've been out shooting somebody."

Connie dumped the things on the bed, while Mrs. Webb busied herself in the hall with a flyspeck, hoping Connie would open the parcels, but too polite to come in and strip off the strings.

After dinner Connie took Walter upstairs to show him the lovely things she had bought, the twins clattering after her, and Mrs. Webb stepping on their heels. The twins, when they saw the boxes, leaped at them, as they always did at anything new that came into the house, pulling at the strings with a chorus of, "Oh, mamma, what is it? Is it somefing for me?"

Connie opened the crinkly paper and the silk underwear lay displayed.

"Aren't they nice?" cried Connie, and plunged her hand into the shimmering depths.

Mrs. Webb now came and stood grimly in the door.

"It's the most expensive kind there is. I suppose it's all right," she sighed, "but of course they didn't have such things in my day." Another sigh. It was always so with Mrs. Webb. "Her day" was always set up as a model of perfection, which a world fast going to the dogs could never again hope to achieve. The world had flowered about the time she was twenty. Since that time the weeds had taken it.

Mrs. Webb rescued Albert as he was climbing up on the bed.

"Don't touch mamma's things, Albert dear. They cost lots of money and we must be careful of them."

Connie exhibited her new evening slippers. Walter

took them with the confused embarrassment men always have in handling women's clothes.

"They're nice," he declared with a great air of sagacity.

A moment later Mrs. Webb let it be known that the twins needed new shoes. Both pairs were getting terribly scuffed; people would begin to notice them. And then she sighed—well, maybe they had better wait a while. Shoes were so expensive.

Walter took it up. If the twins needed shoes that settled it. They should have them.

Mrs. Webb held up a restraining hand. "I don't think we had better buy them now," she declared, and her eyes went to the underwear on the bed. She examined the twins' shoes again. Yes, they would do for some time—two weeks, maybe. Next time she would take the twins down, herself, to select the shoes. She didn't—er—she hated to say it—believe that Connie was a very good judge of children's shoes.

Mrs. Webb started away—the dishes wouldn't wash themselves.

"I'll come up and put the children to bed as soon as I get through," she called as she went downstairs.

Halfway she paused.

"That New York friend of yours called up again today. Didn't say what he wanted. Come on down, Albert, and don't bother your mamma. She's tired."

Connie's head seemed to spin. Floto had called up again! And how like Mrs. Webb it was to announce it from the stairs and then go clumping on down.

And to wait until Walter was there to hear it. What had Floto said? What did he want?

Connie threw her arms around Walter's neck.

"Darling, shouldn't I have bought them?" she asked, indicating the underwear. "I'm so sorry. I can take them back. It'll be all right with the store, I know it will."

"Of course you won't, darling," he assured her. "I want you to have them—everything I can give you." And then his long arms went around and tenderly he kissed her.

Connie felt an exquisite sense of floating. He was hers, after all.

The next afternoon, at half past three, Mrs. Webb came slowly down the stairs with a secretary's book under her arm, on her way to the monthly meeting of the local Foreign Missions Board. It was her great privilege, as Mrs. Webb phrased it, to be secretary of the Board and once a month she put on her black gown and went to the church to work out God's plans. It was Mrs. Webb's passion to save people in far-away lands. She liked to read "papers" on the subject, to go to lectures, to see lantern slides flashed on the screen (usually with a slight crack somewhere on the slide) showing how badly God was needed in Whang-Hoo. It did not matter to Mrs. Webb that the people she was seeking to rescue had a religion and a fairly satisfactory God long before Mrs. Webb's God came into existence; no, that did not matter; hers was the right God. And to bring Him to the poor benighted

people she had never seen (except on lantern slides and now and then in an ancient eye-destroying film), the earnest, conscientious woman wrote endless letters to other women secretaries, took up collections, got up fairs, and each spring ate enough strawberries to give her a permanent rash.

At the church she would put a pitcher of drinking-water and a chaste glass on the table, place leaflets on the chairs, and when the meeting was called to order she would get up with a wrinkled paper of notes clutched in her hand and go through the announcements in a monotonous, expressionless voice. After the meeting was over, a few of the ladies would gather around Mrs. Webb, questions would be asked, Mrs. Webb would answer them, and then after the others had gone she would gather up the leaflets, bunch them neatly together, place them in the little cupboard among the flags and banners, and then with her secretary's book under her arm she would start slowly and happily home. God's work had been done.

"I'm going now," said Mrs. Webb as she came into the sitting room where Connie was. "When you take the children out for their walk, be sure to stop and let them rest along the way." It was said in a tone indicating that Connie could not be trusted to put the children into their clothes and get them down the street and back without some terrible catastrophe descending upon them. "And make them walk along correctly." Yesterday Allen was bad, declared Mrs. Webb, and people had turned to stare at him. She bent her fixed, bespectacled eyes upon the culprit. *Clck!*

clck! "But of course he won't be bad today. Kiss grandma good-by."

She bent over and extended her wrinkled face, and then, rising, started sedately down the street with her black book under her arm.

A moment later she turned. "Be sure to wash their faces," she called.

As Connie stood looking after her mother-in-law she felt a sudden, inexplainable bitterness toward her. It was not something she could put into words; it was vague and indefinite, but all the more bitter. In many ways Mrs. Webb was admirable. Once, when Albert had been ill, she had sat up night after night, tirelessly, patiently, even sweetly. Connie had been amazed at how helpful, patient, and understanding Mrs. Webb had been. "I mustn't think things against her," Connie said to herself.

Connie dressed the wiggleworms and started down the street. Usually taking the twins out for a walk was one of the deep, intense joys of Connie's life. She liked to be seen with them, to have people stop and ask her about them. How many friends they had! How many people came up to talk to them—and the great number of human beings who wanted to stuff their tummies with cakes, cookies, and deadly candies! But now she felt a vague uneasiness, a curious desire to look over her shoulder and see who was coming behind her. But as she continued down the street, with the twins galloping ahead one moment and the next clinging to her hands as if they were life-preservers, the feeling passed away.

A vague uneasiness haunted her. What if Floto should pass in his paint-spattered car and stop? What could she do? People would see her. Word, by that marvelous machine of small-town communication—gossip—would get around. It would reach Walter.

Then more lies. How sick she was becoming of them.

Now, as she walked along, she made up phrases which she would use if Floto stopped. She was on her way home—Albert didn't feel well, seemed to have a fever—and then she would hurry on. But that, she knew, was only putting it off. Some day. . . .

Almost unconsciously she avoided the streets where there were likely to be people. Junction City had never seemed lovelier than now, with its trees forming an arch at the top, where they seemed to be engaged in whispering enchanting mysteries. In the distance, through the softly swaying canopy, she could see the water tower, and through another dancing rift she could see the steeple on the courthouse, and in the distance the belfry on the church—how well she knew these Pikes Peaks! how like old friends they seemed!

There was the sound of a car behind her, the honk of a horn, and her heart sank within her. Floto—and then the car passed on by. It was the rattling, mud-stained car of a farmer and his wife coming in to town with their eggs to do their "trading."

As the mud-stained car went rattling on by, Connie realized how nervous she was; how everything unknown carried a menace.

Connie started north on State Street, which would

take her in the direction of the courthouse and into the Square, where the interest of the town centered. She became conscious of a familiar form standing on the sidewalk and leaning idly against the hotel. Floto. In the crook of his arm was a small, furry kitten with which he was playing. He was stroking it gently, stopping now and then to waggle his finger at it, while the kitten lazily reached out a claw. His face had lost its look of hardness and now there was about it an almost appealing tenderness.

At this moment Yansca came out of a store across the street, and started to walk away. At sight of her, Floto straightened, his whole interest now centered in the girl. Hastily he dumped the kitten on the sidewalk, and in a gesture characteristic of him his hand went to his tie; he gave it a tug which made it swell luxuriously above his vest, and then he started across the street. The kitten gave a thin wail, ran along the sidewalk, came to the curb, bewildered at the complexities of the street, gave another pitiful *meow,* and then the mite boldly started across in pursuit of its friend. A car shot by in front of it, which caused the little creature to hesitate a moment, while it turned to look with fixed eyes upon Floto, fast disappearing. But it stood too long. A second car came speeding up the street from the opposite direction. The driver tugged at the wheel, the car swerved, but the kitten, waking to a realization of its predicament, started to dash back to the safety of the first curb. Too late. The rear wheels of the car passed over the furry little ball. But the tragedy was unobserved by Floto, for he had

lost all interest in the kitten, now twitching in the street. The kitten had served him while he had been interested; then he had seen something else and had carelessly discarded it.

Floto had caught up with Yansca and was now walking beside her, chatting brightly. Now and then Yansca turned her face half sidewise to look up at him, with evident admiration.

Yansca with Floto! At this hour Floto should be at his billboard at work, but instead he was calmly sauntering down the street with Yansca. How like him it was, Connie thought, to get acquainted with a young and pretty girl and to neglect his work to be with her.

He walked with a slight swagger, one hand in his pocket and the other on her arm, and he talked with the loud confidence which was his when he was on the street, and especially when he served as escort to a pretty girl. Yansca was absorbed in every word, and as Connie tried to realize how wonderful Floto must seem to her—he who could talk New York, studios, Broadway, the world she had dreamed of—Yansca's bright laugh rang out pleasantly.

"Sure I did," declared Floto, and waved his hand with an air which said: "Oh, it wasn't anything. I do lots of such things."

And then his hand came back to her arm.

They turned into an ice-cream parlor, and Connie could imagine the scene inside—Floto selecting the table with the air of personal importance which he assumed on such occasions. He would sit down ostentatiously, shuffle his chair, run his eye over the people

to see who was there, while all the time he kept up a fire of supposedly bright chatter. Now he was seated, but he would not look at the menu card. Instead, he would summon the young, half-frightened girl who waited on the table and say: "What you got today, Mary? Anything fit to eat? How about those sundaes? You make 'em on Sunday and keep 'em all the rest of the week, *ain'dt* it? he would end in a Jewish-immigrant imitation.

The girl would stand there, ill at ease, half uncertain whether he was displeased or was merely jesting, while everybody in the ice-cream parlor looked and listened, ready to laugh at the girl's expense.

Then he would give his order.

"All right, run along, Mary. We'll sample that. You're a nice girl, Mary. I was just kidding you, that's all."

Suddenly Connie's heart went out to Yansca, and she saw herself once more a young girl in Greenwich Village when Floto had seemed such a wonderful person. She could see, now, that this was the way he had acted then; he had had this same swagger, this way of showing off, this manner of making a girl think she was his sun. Connie had been on the scholarship committee of the Woman's Club which had chosen Yansca, and she believed in Yansca's possibilities. Connie wished she could go to Yansca and warn her. But this was impossible. Guarded as she might make the warning, it would get back to Floto; he would be infuriated and would become more threatening than ever. No, she could say nothing—anyway, not yet. But as Yansca

went in the door, her face turned so confidently toward Floto, Connie's heart went with her.

Connie paused and, in order not to be seen by Floto, retraced her steps, and then abruptly turned into East Fourth Street and walked down it quickly. At this sudden change the twins glanced up in surprise, but something in their mother's face silenced any protest and their little feet pattered hurriedly to keep up with her.

Before Connie realized it, she was in that part of town known as "on the other side of the track." Junction City, like most small towns, had a social Mason and Dixon line. Nobody who was really "nice" lived in this damned region. People in this section of town never figured in "Society and Social Notes" in the paper; they did not "belong." The houses were smaller; they needed paint; lost souls sat on cluttered front porches in their shirt sleeves. Of evenings barefoot boys drove cows down the street and took them to barns in the rear. A man came out with an insect spray-gun, vigorously pushed the handle back and forth; there was a hissing, spray flew, and then the lost man would put the milk pail between his feet and begin pumping away. Nobody of any consequence lived there—except now and then this part of town had a disconcerting way of turning out a leader. Two or three boys from this mean section had become prominent figures in the state, and one boy who had made the mistake of being born there now lived in Chicago, and once had come home on a visit in a big car with a liveried chauffeur. But in spite of these

inexplicable things, the part of town beyond the tracks was irretrievably lost.

Connie felt a sudden tenseness and knew that she was meeting Nettie. So instantaneous was the feeling that it came almost before she recognized Nettie, as if some subconscious part of her were on guard, even more alertly than was the top of her mind. Connie had never spoken to Nettie in her life; each had known who the other was, after the way of small towns, but they had never formally conversed. There was not only between them the barrier of the two sides of the town, but also there was the fact that Nettie was the typist who worked in the courthouse and that she had been reprimanded by Walter.

Connie wondered for a moment why Nettie should be away from work so early in the afternoon. Nettie was too highly rouged and powdered, and her lips were too carmine. But she was pretty, with the bloom that so many girls have for a short time, and which, alas! so quickly fades.

Connie expected to speak to Nettie, smile, and pass on.

But as Nettie came closer, something poignant in her touched Connie.

"How-do-you-do, Nettie?" she heard herself say.

"Howdy-do, Mrs. Webb?"

And then Connie realized that Nettie had imperceptibly paused, hoping that Connie would talk to her.

"Almost lost over here, aren't you?" said Nettie. She moved her fingers nervously a moment. "I—I suppose you are out for a walk, aren't you?"

Connie said that she was.

"I'm just on my way back from the office," Nettie explained. "I am taking a little walk around, first. Sometimes I—I just hate to go"—she paused as if suddenly realizing what she was saying—"well, go home."

It was like Nettie, shallow, superficial, well-meaning Nettie, to let her thoughts run away with her, but Connie had a sudden warmth of feeling for her.

As they walked on together, Nettie turned her big blue eyes upon Connie.

"C-could I talk to you, Mrs. Webb?" she asked. "Could you come over to my house a minute? I—I don't have many callers," and after a moment, almost unconsciously, she added, "now."

Connie hesitated. What should she do? Could Nettie want to talk to her about Art Looker? Connie knew that Walter would want her to keep out of the affair, but there was the appeal of Nettie's big doll eyes and the catch in her voice.

"Why, yes, I think I can, for a moment," Connie answered. "Poor girl," she thought, "she needs some one to confide in."

The house was a small one, with a wooden walk leading from the cement one to the door. The postman had come on the afternoon delivery, and in the little black letter-box on the wall by the door was a package in stiff cardboard, and as Nettie went by she took it from the spring.

It was a photograph of a motion-picture star. "For a quarter you can get the picture of any star you want,"

Nettie explained as she opened it. She displayed the picture of an impossibly-good-looking man. "It's autographed, too." Nettie ran her hand over the signature in white ink at the bottom of the picture. "Think! his hand wrote that, and now I have it." She paused a moment; a cloud floated over her thin, pretty face. "Of course, he may not have written it. I don't know. Some say they don't, but I want to think he did."

A canary hung in a cage. It was something new to the twins, and now they looked at it in the mixed wonder and awe they had for anything new. Especially were they interested in the cuttlebone, as Tommie, the canary, pecked at it. Albert wanted to feed him, and Nettie brought a leaf of lettuce, while the twins stood watching Tommie as he struggled with the leaf.

During the talk with Nettie the twins eyed her curiously. She was obviously different from the rest of their mother's friends, a fact that caused them to maintain a dogged neutrality. Even when Nettie, bending down to them, exclaimed, "Aren't they dears!" the twins still suspended judgment, and crowded closer to their mother against a threatened embrace. But Nettie simply gazed at them longingly. After a moment she said, "I had a little baby sister once."

"I want you to come upstairs with me, to my own room," said Nettie, and led the way up the creaking, uncarpeted stairs to a small room under the eaves. As Connie went in she had the feeling of being in a stuffy, overcrowded room. The walls were covered with pic-

tures of film stars cut from the magazines devoted to gossip of Hollywood. There were also pictures of romance; lovers strolled together through shady lanes, and framed and hanging on the wall was a poem about love.

"Of course, it isn't nice like your house," said Nettie, as she waved her hand over the little room. "Sometimes I walk past your house. It must be nice to live in such a fine home."

Abruptly she turned to Connie.

"I want to tell you something," said Nettie. "I expect you'll think I am—well, pretty bad—when you're so sweet and wonderful. It's this." With sudden decision Nettie opened the drawer of her cheap bureau and brought out a picture of Art Looker in an ivory frame purchased at the Penny store. "I know it's wrong, I know it, but I want him so. I—I get so lonesome. I tell myself I won't have anything more to do with him, and then he calls up on the phone and says he's coming and—well, I just let him come. . . . Look, I wrote it down on a piece of paper." Nettie fumbled in the drawer a moment and drew out a sheet of stationery, with a fancy, curlycued letter M embossed in one corner. On it she had written, "I won't have anything to do with A. L. again." Underneath she had placed her initials, N. M.

Her hands went up to her eyes. "The very next day after I wrote this I—I saw him. . . ."

Connie caught a glimpse of the life Nettie led. She saw Nettie under the stairs, pecking away at her typewriter, saw her come home, saw her in the kitchen,

cooking. She saw Nettie's husband in his overalls as he worked at the pumping station, turning huge valves and packing waste in pipes; she saw him as he came home, a smear of grease on his face, tired, hungry; she saw him eating at the table, his sleeves rolled up, his hairy arms on the white tablecloth. She saw Nettie at the movie show—the music played softly as a world of make-believe and romance unrolled before her. And then handsome, dashing Art Looker, who clerked in the drug store, had come to town. . . .

And Nettie, on her part, saw before her the trig, smart-looking Mrs. Walter Webb, who lived on the other side of town, who had a nice car, a nice home, a woman everybody looked up to and respected. And as Nettie looked at Connie she thought to herself: "I wish I was like her. She's so nice—such a lady."

Mr. Webb was going to discharge her, Nettie said, and would Connie please say something for her? "If he fires me, I don't know what I'll do." Nettie's thin hands moved helplessly in her lap. "If people get down on me . . . sometimes I wish I had never been born. Lots of people shouldn't of been born, anyway. Of course, it's against religion, but that's what I think, sometimes."

Connie was moved—simple, shallow Nettie, seeking romance, driven on by emotions a thousand times deeper than she knew or could possibly understand. Connie, with the quick, emotional nature that was a part of her, put her arm about Nettie.

"Don't worry, Nettie. I'll speak to Mr. Webb for you."

Nettie's face lit up. "Oh, will you?" she cried. "I won't ever see Art Looker again. Honest, I won't. Listen. I'll show you. Here, look." Her hand dived into the bureau and brought out an old, worn, limp imitation leather Bible. "I promise before God I won't." Nettie's thin little hand rested on the Bible and a tense, wild look of determination flamed in her eyes. "You'll see," she cried, "you'll see. I don't know what's the matter with me. Sometimes I get this way." Her big, blue, tear-filled eyes fastened upon Connie. "Oh, how I wish I were like you—so fine, so splendid, never having to think about doing wrong."

"I know everything's going to come out all right, Nettie," she assured her.

When Connie came downstairs, Allen and Albert, grown tired of exploring the house, had returned to the cage and were standing on chairs, their eyes glued on Tommie. Tommie, now accustomed to his visitors, was clinging to the side of the cage with his tiny claws, pecking at his precious cuttlebone.

"Oh, mamma, we must have a Tommie, too," cried Albert, "and get him somfing to wipe his mouf on, because he's so polite."

Connie and Nettie laughed, and Connie threw her arms around Albert in an ecstasy of love. Precious, darling Albert with his quaint, killing remarks!

As they were leaving, the twins went up in their best party style and solemnly shook hands with Nettie. It was as if they had decided that a person grand

enough to have so marvelous a possession as Tommie was entitled to their profoundest respect.

"Good-by," they shrilled from the street. "Come to see us sometime."

As Nettie stood waving at them, she swallowed slightly . . . then they were gone.

The rest of it happened that evening at supper. After Connie returned from the walk she had to get supper, for on the afternoons that Mrs. Webb went to a meeting of the Foreign Missions Board she was too tired to work. And always after such an occasion, Mrs. Webb had to tell all that had happened; no detail seemed too inconsequential. She told what each person present had said, repeated the terrible conditions the speaker had described, but now she had finished. She moved her big, staring, bug-like eyes over to the twins.

"Were Albert and Allen nice this afternoon?" she asked. "If they don't act polite when they are out people will think they are not nice."

"Yes, they were nice, just as good as could be," said Connie. "They walked along properly."

"Let us hope so. I want people to think well of them."

The time had come for Connie to put in her plea for Nettie, but now, as she sat looking across the table at Walter, she could not bring herself to it. "I'll wait till tonight and tell him when we are going to bed," she said to herself.

When Walter asked her where she had gone, she answered vaguely—they had just walked along the

street, nowhere in particular. It was not a lie, but it shaded the truth; she had told all—except that she had stopped in at Nettie's.

Walter was in good spirits as they talked. Yes, indeed, he had some good news to tell. Tom Uzzell, the political leader in the district, had come in to see him and had talked to him about the idea of—"Well," said Walter, "he called it stepping out."

In reality, it meant that it was time for Walter to think of running for Congress. Of course, he couldn't run right away. It would take three or four years to get things lined up. "The best apples don't fall the first time you shake the tree, that's what he said," declared Walter. Walter laid his hand on Connie's. "Well, wifie," he declared in his jesting tone, "I don't know what you think about it, but to me it listens pretty good."

Walter—some day in Congress. She could go to Washington and live in the winter. Wonderful schools for the children—

Walter smiled at the flush of joy on her face.

"It isn't so bad, for an honest workingman, is it!" His eyes rested on her fondly. "You'll be a big help to me there, Connie."

Connie knew what he meant. Walter had not had the advantages, in the way of education and early association, that she had had; sometimes there were slips in his grammar; he still dreaded formal dinners with their collections of shining cutlery. Much of one's success in Washington, Walter said, was due to one's

wife—and again he patted Connie's hand. "Well, I guess I ought to ring up a full fare there."

The conversation was interrupted by Albert.

"Oh, mamma, if we go to Washington, can I have a polite bird like Tommie?"

Mrs. Webb turned her staring eyes upon Albert.

A polite bird like Tommie? What did he mean?

"Like this afternoon," explained Albert. "Tommie he was so polite that when he got through eating he wiped his mouth on a bone."

Connie felt herself trembling; she saw Mrs. Webb staring at the twins. And then Mrs. Webb turned to Connie. Where had they been? Connie hadn't mentioned taking them to anybody's house.

"It was at the lady's house with the canary," Allen explained.

Connie saw Walter smile. "You might follow the canary's table manners and wipe your own mouth. Where was it, Connie?" he asked after Allen had made a vague dab at his mouth.

Connie heard herself telling it—saw Mrs. Webb's eyes turned upon her, saw Walter swallow. How well she knew that sign, the slight, involuntary contraction of his throat when he was stirred or when anger was rising.

"Why, Connie, you didn't really go in Nettie's house, did you? I sent her home this afternoon. She's been seeing that man Looker again."

Connie tried to be calm, tried to take it as if it meant nothing—she had just happened to walk across the tracks with the children and then she had met

Nettie and Nettie had asked her in for a moment. "That's all there was to it," she finished.

Walter's voice grew firmer. No, that wasn't all.

"Darling, I don't want you going to her house—"

"Yes, and taking the children in there," put in Mrs. Webb.

"Connie, she isn't good enough to speak to you. Don't you think it's taking advantage of me to go around and hobnob with her?"

Hobnob—the word struck her like an edged stone. "He doesn't understand," a voice cried within her. And then, choking, her heart clamoring, she began to defend Nettie, tried to make Walter see Nettie as she had seen her, yearning for romance—tried to make him see Nettie's husband coming home in his overalls, the smears on his face. "She's not going to do it any more," she declared. "I know she isn't. She swore it on the Bible."

She tried to make vivid the scene of Nettie with her hand on the old worn Bible, her eyes flaming with decision. Walter hesitated as Connie continued, and she saw that she was about to win him over. And then Mrs. Webb broke in:

"She's just using Connie to get hold of you. I know their kind."

Mrs. Webb gave a little, high, self-satisfied cackle, and Connie could have struck her.

"One time I knew a girl like that," continued Mrs. Webb. "She was from the country and came to town to work in a millinery shop." The girl hadn't been nice, Mrs. Webb said, and she had warned the other

people about her, and they had said that the girl would, as Mrs. Webb said, straighten out. "Of course she didn't," finished Mrs. Webb. "We had to tell her to leave town. When a girl begins to slip she's gone," declared Mrs. Webb.

Connie saw Walter hesitating; saw the slight wrinkle which came in his forehead when he was making a bothersome decision.

He turned to Connie as unconsciously he reacted to his mother's suggestion. His voice hardened.

"I don't want you to have anything more to do with that woman. Nothing good can come of it, and it's just working against me. Why, Connie"—his voice softened and again he was her beloved Walter—"she isn't fit to speak to you!"

"Nor to the twins," put in Mrs. Webb. "I think it's a shame, taking those two innocent children into that fallen woman's house. Think what has probably happened in there!" Mrs. Webb raised her eyes at thought of the terrible scenes.

Connie felt a great trembling and she heard herself answering Mrs. Webb. Fallen woman! How the words had shocked Connie. Nettie hadn't been any such person. Why, she was just like anybody else!

"Well, all I can say is that your idea and mine differ as to what constitutes a fallen woman," said Mrs. Webb in her faintly complaining way. And then she turned her eyes, as she always did, to Walter for approval.

Walter's face hardened; his lips formed into a thin, unyielding line.

"I'm going to ask you not to have anything more to do with her. One more slip and out she goes." It was the stern, unforgiving, relentless, Plymouth Rock Walter speaking.

"That's what I say, Walter," declared Mrs. Webb. "If you have such a woman in your office, it's going to reflect on you and keep you from getting ahead. You ask Mr. Uzzell."

Walter had not thought of this, and Connie could see that it made an impression on him.

Mrs. Webb rose. Connie would have to do the dishes, as she always did on the evenings that Mrs. Webb rescued the heathen.

"Well, I must go upstairs and write my minutes. If I put it off they aren't so good. We had a fine meeting today. We seemed to get somewhere."

Gathering up her secretary's book, she started upstairs.

At the top she paused. "Your New York friend came by here this afternoon; just ran up to the door and asked if you happened to be in."

The door closed behind her.

Chapter Eight

WALTER stared at Connie in astonishment, unable to understand why she had deliberately gone into Nettie's house and made friends with her. And on the very afternoon that he had sent Nettie home.

"I can't understand what made her *want* to do it," he thought to himself.

Now and then he and Connie had fierce, flaming arguments—and for a terrible moment he would wonder why under the sun he had ever married the woman—and then with the quickness of a puff of smoke it was gone and the deep affection he had for her returned. Then he would feel foolish that he ever had such an absurd thought.

As they talked, thoughts came up in Walter's mind that he was not really conscious of, deep, slinking, uneasy, troubled thoughts. One was about Floto.

At first, Walter had received Floto with the genial heartiness he had for everybody; especially he wanted to be nice to him for Connie's sake; but the more he saw of Floto the less he cared for him. He saw him coming in from his work in his paint-spattered car, with ladders tied on the side and with coils of rope and buckets of paint jiggling in the bottom of the car. He saw him run the car into the garage, peel off his

smeared overalls, and then swagger down the street. He watched him go into the pool halls, where he played endless games of pool. He saw him standing on the street, in front of the hotel or the pool parlor, watching girls as they passed. A girl would come into sight; Floto would watch her as she came toward him, his bright, calculating eyes flashing over her; as she passed his head would turn and his eyes would follow her until they picked up somebody else. . . .

"I think you ought to cut out that man Floto," said Walter. "The more I know about him the cheaper he looks. I think he's pretty small fry. How much longer is he going to hang around here?"

"Not much longer. I think he's about through," Connie heard herself say.

"Well, I hope so."

It was the nearest to a clash they had been in a long time; and now as Walter looked across at her his genial lightness was gone and Connie felt herself up against the unyielding, immovable iron which lay at the depths of Walter's nature. It was as if a door had opened and she had caught a glimpse that she had never seen before—a threatening glimpse, indeed.

Walter rose and silently went to his big leather chair and pulled the little silk cord; the light went on. Connie rose and went to the kitchen with weak and trembling knees. Not much had been said; Walter had been quiet, but with the slumbering, ominous quiet of a volcano.

Abruptly he rose, came into the kitchen, and his long arms wrapped around her.

"Say, darling, I apologize for riding you that way. I don't know what was the matter with me. Guess I was tired, or something. Here, take this on account," and he kissed her with the tenderness which always so stirred her.

Connie's heart leaped . . . it was all over.

A thing that Connie must think about was Walter's birthday—his thirty-first. It would soon be here, and each year she had some little surprise for him. Sometimes it was a dinner; once they had taken their suppers and had gone out to Lover's Leap for a picnic, and once—oh, memorable occasion—they had gone to Kansas City, stayed overnight with her mother, and attended the theater. Half the fun, each time, was planning it. And always Walter would pretend good-humoredly that he was greatly surprised and that he hadn't seen anything suspicious, as he called it.

"I could barbecue a beef and he'd pretend that he hadn't seen anything unusual going on," Connie sometimes said. Once there had been a really-truly surprise—there hadn't been anything! All evening she had seen Walter looking suspiciously around; if a curtain moved, or a step sounded on the street, he would determinedly bury his face in a book. And so now Walter never knew whether there was to be a display in memory of the great day, or nothing at all.

Connie debated it. Should she go ahead and try to get up a surprise party for Walter, or should she have nothing at all? A fear raced through her. What if she went ahead and got up the party, and something

went wrong that very day? What a tragedy it would be!

But it helped to get her mind off herself. Yes, she would plan a dinner for two or three extra couples and surprise Walter.

Connie, a few days later, sat before her dressing-table in her bedroom, adding the last touches. In a moment she would walk down to the courthouse, and there she would get Walter's car and then she would hurry out to where Floto was painting a billboard and explain to him that she was trying to get the money. If she could only hold him off a few days longer, Floto would be through his work and would have to move on to another town.

"I believe I can do it," she thought. She would explain that she had to borrow the money from her mother in Kansas City and that she hadn't yet been to get it.

The clock on the mantel, when she came down, showed four. She would have to go to where Floto was working on the billboard, and get back before Walter was through his work. But today Walter had the car parked down by the courthouse, and there she would have to get it, dash out to Floto's, and then come back. She would tell Walter the lie she had planned to use before—that she had been to visit old Mrs. Hooper. For a moment Connie felt sick—more lies, she who had always been so straightforward and truthful. At first, she had meant to tell him only one lie, but the telling of one seemed to necessitate another to cover it up. "I've taken the car before and gone

to see Floto and not had to tell him the lie about old Mrs. Hooper," Connie thought. Maybe it would be the same today.

Connie went down to the back yard where the twins were industriously digging a hole to China. They wanted to go through to the place Mrs. Webb told about where the people had funny eyes and didn't go to Sunday school and church. Connie stood looking at them as they labored busily with their spoons and shovels. Never had they seemed so precious.

Mrs. Webb looked up.

"They're so noisy today that I thought I'd keep them back here," she said. "It'd just make people talk to see them when they've got a noisy spell on."

Connie's eyes filled with tears—her twins, her wonderful twins. And then she thought of what Walter had said about Nettie—that children should be taken away from such a person.

Connie started down the street, going over and over in her mind what she would say to Floto. She could see the scene. Floto would be sitting on the swinging platform—cradle, he called it—in his smeared clothes, the little color-board in one hand, his brush in the other.

She must not antagonize him, must not stir his temper, and she must assume that she had faith in his scheme to make money quickly.

"I'm awfully sorry, Ed," she would say, when he gave the rope a pull and came down, "but I haven't been able to get it yet." And then she would tell him that they spent it all as fast as it came, but that she

was trying to get it. She would smooth things over —spar for time. Soon he would have to move on and the crisis would be past.

As Connie came in sight of the Square, she looked anxiously to see if the car were parked in its accustomed place, on the north side of the courthouse. If it were gone, or if Walter were out in it, then what would she do? She must not take the chance of waiting another day before seeing Floto.

Four o'clock. It was the hour that the farmers had once started home. But those slow horse-and-wagon days were over; now the farmers worked in the fields until late, got in a day's work, hopped into their cars, and dashed in to town. After they had sold their eggs and bought their groceries, they would go to the movie show, and then return home.

Suddenly Connie's heart gave a leap—on the street a few feet ahead of her was Floto in his flashy clothes, talking to old Mr. Givens, the promoter. But why should Floto be on the street at four o'clock of an afternoon? This was the second time she had seen him in the street when he should have been working —once with Yansca, and now with Mr. Givens. She felt a wave of thankfulness. Maybe, after all, he had finished his work and was leaving town. But why should he be talking to old Mr. Givens? Old Mr. Givens, with his high voice and his watery eyes, was the last person in the world that Floto would be interested in. Once before she had seen them talking together. Queer.

Floto's hand went up in the half salute, half wave that he had for people.

"Hello, there!" he called, and started toward her.

She must not be seen talking to him. She looked around desperately, a deep, frightened pumping at her heart. She saw Avis Templeton through the window of the Yehle dry-goods store, examining a piece of cloth by the daylight from the window, and swooped down upon the surprised Avis.

"I was just looking for you," she exclaimed, breathlessly. Would Avis come over for a bridge game?

Avis stared at her.

Yes, certainly she'd like to. Why not?

"That's fine, Avis," Connie heard herself say, while all the time she was thinking of Floto. He had started toward her as if he wished to speak to her. Or had he? Had it come to a place where he dared stop her on the street and threaten her? "Well, so long. I've got to dash," she finished.

Avis, still holding the cloth in her hand, stared after Connie a moment, and then she saw Floto. Her eyes raised slightly.

As Connie continued down the street she felt a sudden contraction within her. It was the feeling she had had as a child when she had had to go out alone at night and sudden black fear had clutched at her heart. A thick-set figure was approaching her. The heavy body, the thick shoulders, the fat jowls—Katzmeier.

"It can't be," something cried within her.

And yet she knew it was.

She would not speak to him. He had probably come to Junction City to inspect the billboards that Floto had been painting and wouldn't recognize her; lots of men didn't recognize women when the women had on different clothes.

The man stopped. His pudgy hand went up to his hat.

"Hello! I expect you are surprised, mebbe," he said thickly, with the faint accent she remembered when she had seen him in his office in St. Louis. "I guess you remember me—Mr. Katzmeier. Ain't it funny, just as I vas going to the hotel to telephone you! And now I meet vit' you on the street."

She must not talk to him on the street—the street which had so many eyes. A stranger in town talking to Connie—a thick, fat stranger with an accent!

For a moment she thought of rushing on. No, he had made a mistake, she would say. But that would not do. He would come to the house. . . .

Connie forced herself to smile, and she heard a strange, frightened voice say:

"Why, how-do-you-do, Mr. Katzmeier. I am going this way. Won't you walk with me?"

A frightened, trembling, bravely smiling, casual Connie managed to start him toward a side street, and all the time a voice within her cried: "What does he want? What does he want?"

"I been t'inking it over vhat ve talk—y'know—to-gedder in St. Louis. Listen, Mrs. Vebb, I make you a broposition."

He was going to make an indecent proposal; she had seen it in plays and read it in stories.

"I must be brave," she said to herself, while her mind moved with lightning rapidity. Now she had maneuvered him into the side street, and while she talked, calmly smiling, her eyes leaped ahead.

But Katzmeier had no such proposal. He had been t'inking it over and had decided—vell, to accept her broposition. After all, money vas money; it vould be cheap for her, too; he vould send send Floto on to tome other territory for the t'ree hundredt dollars she had offered.

The slightly protruding eyes, with too much white showing, fastened on her.

Connie felt a great longing in her heart—for three hundred dollars Floto would be moved to new territory; she would never see him again. . . . But how could she get the money? She could telephone her mother, make some excuse, and probably get it.

"I expect you vill t'ink I am not sthraight," continued the thick, slightly hissing voice, "but I am. You t'ink it over, Mrs. Vebb. I am going to Omaha to see some of our paint there, den I come back. If you have the money, all is goot. No one vill know. Dot vill be the endt."

Even if she could get the money, where could she meet him, when he returned from Omaha on his way back to St. Louis? How could he communicate with her? If he called by telephone, Mrs. Webb might be in or Walter might be there. She looked around

desperately. Across the street was the church in which Mrs. Webb held her mission meetings.

"I can meet him there and give him the money," Connie thought.

But what if some one came while she was in the board room with Katzmeier?

"If I can get it, I'll meet you here, on the street," she said.

Katzmeier's small, protruding eyes weighed her. His pudgy hand went into his pocket and brought out a railroad folder, and his eyes went down its ruled lines. He would be in Omaha three days; then he would return. The train it got here at four-two; he would ride up town in a taxi; that would be fifteen minutes; he would meet her here at four-thirty.

His eyes moved over her again. "You vill be here like you say?"

"Yes."

His hairy hand went up in a gesture of dismissal—"Goot by"—and the fat, slightly greasy, thick-necked figure rolled down the street.

A trembling, desperately calm Connie got into the car and started toward the Country Club. That would be better than shouting in a drug-store booth. A few cars were there, while on the course men and women chased elusive balls; faintly she could hear laughter; the players stood still a moment, in little knots; they went through motions and then moved raggedly off again. But there was no one in the lounge, and the booth door was open.

She took off the receiver.

"I want long distance, and I want to charge it to my own number," she explained. "The call is for Kansas City." She gave the number.

In a few minutes the telephone jangled; the daughter of the caretaker came out of the kitchen and started for the booth.

"I'll answer it," said Connie. "I think it's for me. I just put in a call."

Yes, it was her mother. There was nothing wrong, Connie explained. The twins were well. How was she? Now she must tell her. "Mamma," she began, "listen. Can you hear? I—I want you to do something for me—I must have some money right now at once—three hundred dollars. Can you send it to me?" Now she must explain why she wanted it. She could say that it was for Walter; he had to have it in his business. Her mother would not question it. But, no, she could not do that—reflect on Walter. "It's for myself," she said. "I'll tell you when I see you. Can you send me a check today?"

She finished, and a trembling Connie came out of the swirling booth.

Now that she had started the ball rolling, Connie felt a great relief. She had known people to do things that she could not understand—strange, weird things wholly outside their character, she thought. Now that she understood life better, she knew how they felt. If some one had told her six months ago that she would do such a thing she would not have believed it. But it had come about step by step.

"I wonder what they would think if they knew?" she thought as she passed people in cars; and she got a grim pleasure in thinking of it. It was the curious, almost morbid pleasure which she remembered her brother had got when as a boy he had smashed his finger nail, and from time to time lifted up the nail and looked at it.

The thought of Walter had never seemed so dear as when she went back with the car and waited to ride home with him. They walked down the steps of the courthouse together, he with his hand lightly on her arm, his face turned toward her, talking with an eagerness that would seem to denote an absence of days instead of hours.

Tom Uzzell had been in to see him again, he said. "He gave me another talk about getting in line for the congressional race. Said if I mind my p's and q's that in four years more I ought to step with the steppers. That's what he calls it," laughed Walter and she saw the flash of white teeth, and his big, wholesome smile. This smile which, as Connie had once said, so used up Walter's face, never failed to move her. Some people have little, begrudging smiles; their lips spread, a few lines appear, a slight cackle issues, but Walter's was a consuming smile that illuminated and transformed his face.

"Just to see Walter smile makes you feel good all over," some one had once said of him.

One thing that Uzzell wanted to know, Walter continued, was if the crowd could turn up anything on

him, as he put it. The bunch on the other side wouldn't stop at skinning their grandmothers.

Walter had assured him that there was nothing. That was one thing in his favor, his record was clean. Suddenly Connie felt a great trembling; if they found it out they would not scruple to use this against Walter. In a small community it would be enlarged into a tremendous thing. . . .

"But I told him," continued Walter as they got into the car, "that he didn't have to do any sitting up nights worrying about me. And then I told him what a help you would be to me, giving dinners, seeing the big-bugs, and so on. It sure looks good. Of course, it's going to take a little time to swing it. Uzzell had to whip some of the other bunch into line, you know."

Taking the wheel, Walter sent the car speeding down the street.

Connie had thought, before the check arrived, of going to one of the banks, where she and Walter did not have an account, to get it cashed. She knew that the bank would cash it. She could almost hear the cashier say,

"We'll be glad to cash a check for Mrs. Walter Webb," with a slight accent on "Mrs. Walter Webb," the name which meant so much in Junction City. Yes, she could get it cashed, but when the check came she decided to go to the bank where she and Walter had their joint account. It would be a small affair to the cashier; he would not be surprised at a check from her mother and would probably not mention it to Walter.

The check was slow in arriving; in fact, did not

reach her till the day she was to meet Katzmeier. With the check in her hand, she walked almost lightly down the tiled floor and came up to the black-marble counter. And the cashier, glancing at her smiling face, suspected nothing at all of the clamor in her heart.

"Any kind of bills," said a Connie she hardly knew. "They'll all go quickly enough."

Yes, it was a nice day and the twins were doing fine. Oh, they were just wonderful, she said, pleasantly, as she slipped the money into the bag, and then she was gone.

Connie walked with great unconcern down the street and bought the rest of the things for the birthday party. The place cards, the favors, the gay little caps and squawkers. A tired, buoyed Connie walked up and down the aisles at the ten-cent store and stared at the astonishing array which can be bought for a dime. She saw the things and yet she did not see them, for she must keep her eyes on the clock. At other stores she bought mints and candies and completed her purchases.

Twenty-five minutes after four, the gilt hands said. Picking up her bundles, she started down the street. She felt the irony of it—her arms full of surprise packages for Walter and on her way to buy off a man from telling on her!

She was amazed at how self-controlled and casual she could be. Suppose he didn't come, and now suddenly she wanted intensely to see him. And the next moment she wanted to flee. What a strange torture

it was, like going to a dentist with an aching tooth, only a thousand times magnified. What if Walter passed, in the car? What if Avis Templeton came by? Avis with the double-hinged tongue ——

She walked the length of the block—he was not in sight; crossed over the street and then started briskly back. She must not saunter; that would look suspicious—Connie Webb lingering on the street and meeting a strange man! She knew how the tongues would wag. And then she saw the thick, squat figure coming.

"Hullo!" he said, thickly, as he lifted his hat. "I see you are here."

Of course she was! What a foolish thing to say. And now as she saw the thick neck and the black beady eyes with their white coronas she felt a new revulsion. She realized now that unconsciously she had expected him to be nervous and furtive, but instead he was heavy and phlegmatic and as mentally mountainous as if he were in his office. To him it was just a business deal.

"I'm a few minutes late, but I guess it don'dt matter," he said, affably. A smile flashed—vanished—the thick face dropped into its heavy lines . . . he was all business again. "You got it, ain't you?"

"Yes, yes, of course I have," Connie wanted to shriek. Aloud she said, calmly, "Yes, here it is."

As she reached for her purse a package slipped and fell to the sidewalk, and some of the ridiculous favors spilled out.

Ponderously Katzmeier bent over and picked them

up, and as he arose she could hear a slight whistling in his nose.

"I see you been shopping for the liddle twints you told me about alretty. It's nice to have kits," he continued, thickly. "I have some myself, so high."

Katzmeier had told her in St. Louis that he was a father; she had seen the picture; but now, considering the mission that he had come on, it seemed much worse. She thought of Walter. Oh, the difference! "Why, he oughtn't to be allowed to have them," she thought.

She thrust the roll of bills into a hairy hand.

"T'anks. You are going to find it for the best. Now I vill go ofer to the hotel and send him on the Omaha-Lincoln sthring. You ain't going to regret it," he repeated. "I expect you vant to get along now, mebbe," and, uncounted, he put the roll of bills into his pocket.

Connie had expected him to stand on the street, counting the money greedily, a bill at a time. Now the thought came to her that at least this was something in his favor.

He lifted his hat. "Goot-by."

"Good-by," Connie heard herself say.

It had taken only a few seconds, just a moment or two, and it was all over. And now as Connie started down the street she realized that all she had said was "Yes, here it is," and "Good-by."

There was a movement; Katzmeier had turned and was coming toward her. A bolt of fright shot through

her. Maybe he was going to say that she hadn't given him enough money.

"Say, listen, your liddle twints—I dink of t'em. Here"—his stubby thumb stripped a bill from the roll—"give it to t'em, blease."

He pushed the bill into her hand and waddled down the street, while Connie stood holding it in astonishment. Before she had come to meet him, Connie had gone over every possible detail that she believed could happen, and yet she had never thought of this. Her own money for her children! And yet in spite of the crudeness of it, a moment's liking for him flashed over her.

Connie started in the other direction, her eyes skimming the street. A farmer had driven into the filling station and now stood beside the car, looking at the storm in the glass container as the gasoline gurgled and lashed to get out. She had never seen him before; there was no one in sight she knew. No Avis.

If Connie could have visualized such a scene before it happened, she would have thought of herself going away somberly and in shame. It was a miserable, despicable thing to do—hire a man to send away a person who could inform on her—but instead of the shame she had a floating sense of lightness. After all, the situation had been solved simply. Why hadn't she done it before? Once Floto was out of town, he could not make a great deal of trouble. He might send back a few demands, but she would watch the mails; she would make arrangements, if a telegram

came, for the telegraph office to call up, and she would go down after the message. The only danger would be that Floto might call up Walter, but this was not likely. Floto would fasten his hopes on her. There might be a few letters, maybe a telephone call, and then slowly the matter would die away, "peter out," she thought lightly to herself.

She met Mr. Givens.

"Hello, Mrs. Webb," he said. She saw his thin face, his watery eyes, heard his high, slightly cracked voice. He wanted to talk—Mr. Givens always wanted to talk. He was born talking. Up and down the street Mr. Givens would go, his cane dangling on his arm, on some secret mission, boring into people's affairs with the relentlessness of a worm into a plank. "Say," he began, but Connie rushed on by. He couldn't possibly say anything of interest to her.

As Connie walked down the street with the package of favors and extras for the dinner party, she hardly seemed to walk at all. In some mysterious way all she need do was to will, and the sidewalk seemed to flow beneath her feet. She glanced up at the clock; the gilt hands showed that it was only five minutes after four-thirty. Why, five minutes hadn't passed since she had met Katzmeier. Five minutes! And how much had happened. The course of her life had been changed; and at other times, days and months seemed to go by when nothing happened.

Mrs. Webb was in the kitchen when Connie arrived home, struggling with the dinner, her sleeves rolled up, her hair tossed about, and her glasses pushed up

on her forehead. Steam from the cooking dimmed them, she said, and always when she fought a dinner single-handed her glasses were pushed up on her forehead, like an automobile racer's when he dismounts from his car for the pictures to be taken. Ordinarily on an occasion when Mrs. Webb had to cook dinner, she would be in a bad humor and would have faint, almost inaudible complaints to make, but this dinner was for Walter and she had waded in heroically.

Connie floated in.

"How's everything, mumsie?" she asked, taking up the word that Walter sometimes used.

The twins had got themselves dirty, and then had insisted on playing out in front where everybody could see them. Mrs. Webb sighed at the terrible tragedy. But Connie did not care; they could have looked like Skippy and his friends, for all that mattered today.

At last, that evening, the table stood a miracle of perfection, the finest and most elaborate dinner Connie had ever given. Connie took pride in her little dinners; they always made quite a bit of excitement in the society notes in the paper the next day, and tonight she knew that she had surpassed herself.

Connie ran her eyes over the table with a deep, satisfied feeling. How much work it represented; how her heart had gone into every detail of it. The favors were in the colored bowl in the center, the strings radiated out to the proper chairs. As she stood there she felt like a great artist who had finished his work and stands gazing at it with the sweet inner glow which follows creation.

It had been arranged that one of the men was to take Walter out into the country, after he had finished at the office, to get his opinion on a farm which the friend was supposed to be buying. When Walter got back the stage would be set; the surprise would be ready.

Connie dressed the wiggleworms and then dressed herself. Now the dinner.

There was a sound; the guests had arrived. They had left their cars around the corner, on the other block, so that Walter's surprise would be complete. Connie received them proudly; even Avis Templeton now seemed a pleasant and gracious person. There was a hubbub of talk, laughter, comments on the table, and now they must be hidden in the dining room so that when Walter came in the front door he would suspect nothing.

There was the sound of a car outside—Walter. He came lightly up the steps and opened the door.

"Hello! Anybody to home?" sang out Walter.

Not a sound. Connie raised her hand, and the merry crowd surged toward him, shouting and laughing. "Yes, somebody's to home," some one called as they trooped about him. Walter's face was a delight.

"Well, by gracious! you've put one over on me this time," he said, and his arm went around Connie.

Never had a party gone off better, and Connie's heart thumped with happiness. She was mistress of all this, and Walter was at his best, laughing and talking with the slow ease that was his. But later as they

sat at the table, a step sounded on the porch, and the door bell rang. Floto.

Connie's heart sank. Why should he come at this hour? What did he want? And then she knew that he had come to tell her that he had been ordered to another location. Connie felt a moment's pity for him. She would be nice to him a few minutes and then maneuver him out.

Floto paused at sight of the party, but only for a moment. It took more than that to upset that confident gentleman.

"Hello, Con! Hello, Walt!" Connie heard him say. "Con" and "Walt!" What must the others think! "Pardon me for doing the goat act, but I didn't know you were throwing a party."

He made a pretense of starting out, but Walter, now in his most wholesome and hearty mood, stopped him. He mustn't be rushed off, Walter said. Come in.

Floto stood bowing, as Connie introduced him. He was sure glad to meet them. Connie saw his eyes move over the table which she had spent so much time on, over the four gleaming candles and the lace tablecloth, and she knew his mental comments. Pretty scrumptious. Must cost a lot of dough. And then she saw his eyes rest on her a moment and move away again.

Walter, always the host, brought up a chair. Mr. Floto must sit down. Yes, Floto guessed he could stay a few minutes, and Connie had to offer him some coffee. In a few moments he was eating cake. Say,

it was just mighty easy to eat, he declared, as he smacked his lips with what was meant to be humorous approval. It sure beat pushin' hotel grub into your face. It was like the good old days in G. V. In a moment he was telling about the good old days in Greenwich Village, when he first met the lady, as he now called Connie. G. V. was indeed a very gay and lively place, as he painted it. Sure was, he declared, as he swirled the coffee in his cup.

When Connie had made the place for him at the table it was next to hers, and now she felt a slight pressure against her leg. Floto. He had tried before, here at the house, to hold her hand and to make advances—surely he wouldn't do such a contemptible thing now! She moved over, but in a moment she felt the pressure again, while he turned to smile at her gayly.

Connie felt a hot rush of indignation, and for a moment thought of leaving the table, but that would never do. She must tolerate it, must sit there and pretend to be gay and jolly while he smiled; now and then his hand went under the table and touched her slightly.

"We will now pull the strings and see what we get," said Connie, and in a moment the guests had on gay paper caps.

"Say, I guess I can get myself something to wear, too," declared the life of the party, and taking out his handkerchief he proceeded to tie the corners into knots and then clapped it onto his head. There was a feeble smile at this display of genius on his part, but

it did not cool his ardor. Soon he took command of the party and his tongue began to wag.

Connie saw the devastating glances flying among the guests, the politely raised eyebrows, and the elaborate politeness with which they treated him; saw Floto in his cheap, flashy suit, saw the contrast to the quietly, modestly dressed men in the room.

"Why doesn't he go?" Connie agonized to herself.

But the brilliant young man had another idea. "Say," he declared, and Connie quivered. Couldn't he begin a sentence any way except with "say"? "I'll show you something kinda nifty. I guess y'know what it is Con—I used to do it in G. V. in the good ol' days. Y'know—this—" and elaborately he gave an imitation of a man playing a musical saw.

Connie's heart seemed to stop. She must not let him give that terrible imitation. But Floto bounced up. "Where's your saw, Walt? Oh yes, your Uncle Dudley knows where it is." Uncle Dudley—"say"—and that high cackling laugh—the glitter of gold in his mouth. . . . Oh, would he never go?

But nothing could stop Floto. Snapping on the light at the head of the cellar stairs, he went clumping down; there were sounds of him fumbling around in the basement, then he came clumping up again with the saw and tack-hammer. And now as he passed Connie he managed to touch her. Dropping down in a chair, he poked the saw between his legs and then elaborately lopped one leg over the other.

"Now ladies and gennelmen, just keep your optics on Uncle Dudley."

His hand moved, the saw began to whine.

"I guess you didn't know a fella could get all that out of a common or garden variety of saw, didje?"

After a time a new idea struck him. Getting up, he tiptoed elaborately across the room to Mrs. Webb's old-fashioned glass curio and went through an imitation of a man listening to a bird singing.

"Hark, hark, the lark!" he cried. "Hello, little birdies. How're you today? *Tweet-tweet!*" he imitated.

The others laughed and Connie felt a burst of indignation at the terrible old dust-catcher, now made more ridiculous than ever by Floto calling attention to it. And again Connie wished she could get rid of it. From now on everybody would laugh at it. She could imagine Avis recounting the scene of Floto and the stuffed birds to her friends.

Floto sat down again.

"Now I'll give an imitation of little stuffed birdie number one," he declared. *Ping* went the saw. "Now I'll give an imitation of its dear brother, little stuffed birdie number two——"

The torture continued.

Now and then he paused. Conversation would get under way again, and then his hand would go to the end of the saw and again the piercing whine would rise. Connie glanced at Avis Templeton. How the news would fly over Junction City tomorrow!

Sitting down at the radio, he spun the dial, and

suddenly the room was filled with a terrific yowling. The amused young man turned it off and on as he thought appropriate. At last he tamed it down.

"Say, everybody, less shuffle a little," and without waiting for word from Connie or Walter he began to push back the chairs and take up the rugs. Wiggling his shoulders and twisting his hips in imitation of a spirited dance, he held out his arms to Connie.

"Fit in, kid, fit in."

As he danced with her he leaned slightly on her.

Later he took up the saw again.

"Say, Con, I got some news for you." *Whine—wail*—went the saw. "I'll give you two guesses what it is." *Whine—wail.*

Now, at last, he was going to tell her that he was being moved on to the Omaha-Lincoln string. It would be just like him to come out, make an evening of it, and put her through all this torture before he told her that he was to be moved to a new location. She could stand it a little longer; after all, things were coming out all right.

"The big boss blew into town today. Y'know I mentioned him to you. Has an office in Saint Looie. And he fired me, he did—that is, he *thought* he was firing me." Floto's cackle rose, his gold teeth flashed. "Yeh, only he didn't. I beat him to it. Before he could get his mouth open I resigned." The saw wailed and whined again. "I had a little surprise up my sleeve worth two of his. It pretty near knocked the pins out from under him when I told him what it was. I am

going to open a radio store right here in good ol' Junction City."

Connie heard the words faintly, and yet with a curious ringing clearness. She remembered now that he had mentioned to her that he had an idea about a radio store.

"That's what I dropped in to tell you," he declared, his foot swinging to the time. He had tried to speak to her on the street, he said, but she had been so hoity-toity that she wouldn't listen.

"Yeh, Mr. Givens and your uncle Dudley we are goin' to open the finest up-to-date radio store west of nowhere. Going to call it 'The J. C. Radio Store.' He and I we been dickering for some time, and now we got it all signed on the dotted line."

Connie had a curious sensation of sinking, of not having heard correctly, and yet she knew that she had.

"Yeh, the big boss he got the shock of his young life today. Hit him where he lived," Floto declared. But he had gone now, gone back to Saint Looie where the blithering idiot belonged. No, sir, no more paint-spreadin' for your Uncle Dudley. Not another dab if they made him a present of every billboard in the world. No, indeedy, he was going to make money from now on in the fine little business that had the world by the tail. Say, did they know anything about radio? Well, he had been interested in it a long time and he'd just tell 'em.

He told them about radio.

Connie heard the terrible words, radio store—Floto was going to live in Junction City. He could not

make a success of it; the store would have hard sledding; the relentless Mr. Givens would demand that he put more money into the store. . . .

Floto rose.

Well, he must shoot along now.

"Well, good-by, customers." His high laugh rose. "Drop in any ol' time you got money in your pocket. Good-by, Con; so long, Walt. Say, anybody got a cigarette before I hit the trail?"

Floto swaggered out, a cloud of smoke floating after him.

The door shut.

A moment later it was pushed open again.

"*Tweet-tweet!*" he squeaked. And then the door closed again.

Connie saw the look pass among the people, saw the glint in Avis Templeton's eyes which said in letters a foot high, "So *this* is the kind of young man that Connie knew in Greenwich Village."

The picture still remained in Connie's mind of Floto with the knotted handkerchief on his head, the saw in his lap, tapping the whining, shrilling blade with the hammer, while he made supposedly humorous contortions with his face in time to the music. And then the imitation of Mrs. Webb's stuffed birds. And she had seen Walter sitting there—Walter who was always so slow to judge—calmly weighing him. And she had seen the steely look settling in his face.

At last, when the party was over, Connie and Walter started up the stairs. And as she heard them coming up the stairs, Mrs. Webb came to the door of her

room. During the evening she had watched Floto with cat-like silence, now and then softly clearing her throat. Then she would glance at Walter. Mrs. Webb was now in the long, funereal dressing-gown that she always put on the moment she went to her room of an evening, and here she sat with her shoulder under her light, reading and yawning until time to climb into bed. She had gone up the stairs some time before the guests had gone, and now stood in the door, one hand pulling her gown together with maidenly modesty at the throat, the other hand holding a dull weekly church paper devoted to foreign missions. It was her custom, as she read the paper, to mark paragraphs she wished to refer to, and then file the thin little magazine carefully away—and never look at it again.

"When I came up, Allen had crawled out of his bed and had got Jazzbo Sam again. He never goes to sleep properly if he gets hold of that thing." It was thus that Mrs. Webb always began, with the twins or some affair in the management to introduce her real subject. It was a nice party except—Mrs. Webb cleared her throat faintly.

"Except for your New York friend. And playing that musical saw! And imitating the birds your poor father gave me. I don't know what people are going to think, really. Now that he's going to settle down and live here, I suppose he'll be wanting to come—well, all the time." She started back to her room. "Well, that's all. I just wanted to tell you about Allen. Good night, Walter; good night, Constance."

The door closed. Connie and Walter were alone.

Chapter Nine

SILENTLY, all evening, Walter had watched Floto without comment, watched him when he had put the saw between his legs and sent up its weird wailings, when he had made the radio roar, and when he had stripped the rugs from the floor and called out, "Fit in, kid, fit in."

And now, as he and Connie started up the stairs together, he turned to Connie.

"Connie, I don't want to kick up a fuss, but I don't like the way you danced with Floto this evening. Everybody was looking at you. I don't think it was nice."

Connie's heart gave a quick, frightened throb. That Walter should think she wished to dance that way with Floto! She wanted to throw her arms around his neck and cry out, "I didn't want to do it. I loathe him," and then tell him all.

He hadn't said anything about it before, Walter explained, as he had thought that Floto would soon be leaving town, but now since Floto was going to stick in town he would have to speak about it.

"I don't want to be ugly about this," Walter continued, "but I want you to cut him out. He's not our kind. I don't know what the other people thought, but I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw you let-

ting him lean on you. Of course, I know you didn't realize how it looked, but—well, I didn't like it at all." A person coming into the room at the moment and hearing it would think that the remark was almost casual, but Connie knew the warning back of it. Walter was never a person to make a scene and to shout wild extravagances, but she knew how earnestly he meant it. "I don't want him ever to come into this house again."

Walter hung his coat and vest on the back of a chair, took off his trousers, and was now placing them in a hanger before putting them away in the closet. It was just such methodical ways which gave him the appearance of being neatly groomed and which served to endear him to Connie. And now in his pajamas he stood before her, and as she looked at him there was a crying in her heart. Oh, that Walter should ever think such a thing of her! That he would believe that she had willingly let Floto dance with her in such an extreme fashion! To confess, now that she was in a trap . . . he would scorn her. No, she could not tell. She must find a way out.

His arm went around her. "I hate to do it, Connie, hate to make a roar, but I don't make a lot of requests of you, do I? You won't have anything more to do with him, will you?"

Connie felt a crying in her heart. Never had Walter seemed so precious, so much her big, good-natured, lovable bear.

"N-no."

"I knew you wouldn't, Connie," and then she could hear him in the bathroom, brushing his teeth.

"I suppose he has just as much right to be in the world as I have," he called, "but I don't want anything to do with him. We two just can't hitch."

This rugged, simple, homely, Abraham Lincoln language—how much it was like Walter! And yet, when occasion arose, some attitude or action of his could be exquisitely beautiful. Often she thought to herself, "He has richer depths in his soul than I have," and then almost on top of this would come the harsh, unyielding, unforgiving iron that lay like slag in his soul. Children, dogs, the beauty of a sunset, the redness of an apple were things to move Walter. Only a few mornings ago he had gone into the yard early to work among the flowers before starting to the office; and then he had come to her with a quivering drop of dew on a rose for her to share it with him. He had stood bending over the fading drop, a look of tenderness on his face.

"Such things are lovely," he said, simply, and then had gone back to his gardening.

It was such exquisite glimpses into his nature that so endeared Walter to her. And then on the other side was a sternness that shocked her. Sometimes he was so yielding and pliable in her hands, so childishly eager to please her, and then suddenly—the stone wall.

Walter had dropped the subject; he would not refer to it again.

"I fired Nettie today," he said, a few moments later.

Connie heard a dull ringing in her ears. How quickly and unexpected it had come. And so things in life seemed to happen, almost without connection. Was that all life was—a jumbled, confused series of incidents, joined higgledy-piggledy, or was there, back of it all, safe and secure somewhere, a meaning? Only a few moments before she had been thinking only of Floto . . . and now it was Nettie.

Fired!

Walter's voice hardened. He had found that Nettie had let Art Looker come to see her again. One of the men at the courthouse had been passing Nettie's the night before and had seen sleek, dapper Art Looker, with his hair plastered down, enter Nettie's house. The man had crept up and peeked through the window at the two embracing in the sitting room.

"I asked her about it," Walter finished, "and she didn't deny it, so I fired her. There wasn't anything else to do. Of course, she cried," he added.

For a moment Connie saw the scene—the man creeping up and spying through the window at poor, starved, romance-crazed Nettie, saw him peeking and listening —disgusting it was—and then reporting it to Walter. And then she could see the scene at the office—Nettie's tears trickling softly and silently out of her big, baby-blue eyes; a little sniffle, that was all—then bravely turning to walk out. No, Nettie would not make a scene, would not hurl bitter denunciations; instead, she would walk out quietly, her head up . . . then she

would go down to her little cubicle under the iron stairs and straighten out her papers, then draw the cover over her typewriter. But stern, unyielding Walter could see it in no such charitable way. She had brought it all on herself; he had warned her, she knew what the consequences would be; then let her pay for it. Connie hoped that he would soften—he who was so generous and forgiving in so many other ways—but now she saw how impossible it was. Poor, little frail Nettie had crashed into Plymouth Rock.

As Walter talked, sitting on the side of his bed, the picture came to her again of Nettie with her canary, the pile of scribbled letters hidden under the mattress in the little upstairs room. What would become of her? She remembered the wild look that had been in Nettie's eyes that day at the house, the wild, pitiful, doomed look of a trapped animal.

Connie wanted to cry out, "I'm just as bad as she is," but she could not bring herself to it. She had expected Walter to have qualms, an uneasy worry at what he had done, surely a moment's regret, but already he was yawning. He had done the right and proper thing. Nothing else mattered. That relieved him of all further responsibility.

"Well, I suppose we had better call it a day," he said, once more his genial, wholesome self. "Here's something to dream on." Leaning across to her bed and putting his arms around her, he kissed her. "Good night, darling. Life wouldn't be worth while without you."

In a moment he was peacefully asleep.

In the meantime something very different was happening at another house in Junction City. At Nettie's. Fired! Sensitive, weakling Nettie, without the spirit to fight back. Where would it end? Another girl, discharged from her job for such a reason, would have sought the refuge of a large city and begun all over again. But there was her husband; and also she had lived in Junction City all her life. It was her home; she had never been away from the small town. Where could she go?

The disgrace of it! How the news would fly! How the people would stare! Every time she walked down the street there would be nudges, eyes would follow her, snickers, whispers, men's remarks.

And now on the day she had been discharged and her little world had turned upside down, what, after this cataclysmic event, must she do? Why, cook supper for her husband!

And now Nettie was cooking it, moving about the kitchen in silent, tearless agony. If she could only get away from Junction City, if she could only get out into the world. But how? Where? And now, as she fussed with the little kerosene stove, with its smelly wicks, it seemed as if she had always worked in that kitchen. That terrible kitchen. How could she tell her husband that she had been discharged? The disgrace. What would he say?

There was the sound of a car outside and she knew without looking that it was he, John, her husband. There was a roar as he sped up the engine, as he always did before stopping the car, and then the quick,

abrupt silence as he pulled the choke. After he had finished supper he would sit fiddling with the radio a few minutes, and then after a time he would elaborately haul out his watch. Well, he guessed he'd run downtown and see what was going on. Maybe some of the fellows would like to have a game of pitch.

He came around to the rear of the house as he always did, with his coat over his arm. Through the window, as he passed, she saw his smudged face, and the collar of his work-shirt, open at the throat, and in his mouth was his old wheezy pipe. What a contrast he was to the immaculate Art Looker with his carefully pressed clothes and his white, slender hands.

He came in sullenly, with a bare glance at her, and going to the stove took the teakettle, carried it to the kitchen sink, and poured hot water into the tin washpan. Then the harsh grating of the pan in the sink.

"You're back a little earlier than usual," Nettie said.

About the same time as usual, he guessed.

Now he was sitting at the table, coatless, his sleeves rolled up on his hairy arms, his head immediately over his plate.

"Now I've got to tell him," Nettie thought. "No, I'll wait a few minutes longer, until he finishes his supper," she decided.

Abruptly he stopped, with his fork in his hand, the tines pointing up.

"You're a pretty mess," he said suddenly.

Nettie's heart thumped heavily. What did he mean? Was it something about the cooking?

"I heard all about it. I hadn't got uptown till I heard it," he declared, triumphantly. "You got yourself fired today for carryin' on with that Art Looker. And you wasn't going to tell me about it. I was just waiting to see."

His temper flared up, in that quick, violent way she knew so well. Cheating, that was what she was doing. And now everybody in town would know it. Slipping out and chasing that slick-haired smart aleck. Did she know what a lot of husbands would up and do? Choke the life out of her. They would!

He was now tilted back in his chair, with his weight on its back legs, and his feet under the front ones, while he poked at his teeth with a toothpick. As she heard the bitter words, life suddenly seemed a great and powerful giant that she could not cope with. And now as she sat there, pretending to eat, with the harsh voice of her husband grating in her ear, she wished her life was over.

A fine wife she had made, he sneered, and now the whole town talking about her and calling him a sucker every time he went down the street. Yes, a fine mess she'd made of it, when all the time he had been sweating and working like hell at the waterworks. A lot he'd got out of their marriage. Double-crossed, that's what.

At last he finished, or at least he stopped. It would be resumed the next day and the next. He arose, fiddled with the radio a few minutes, then without a word got into his car. There was a roaring of the engine and he rattled away.

Nettie began to wash the dishes, still half dazed by the fierce words. She would call up Art Looker; she must have somebody to sympathize with her. Art Looker with his cheery ways, his good looks, his warm kisses. Oh, just to see him tonight! tonight when she was so alone!

One thing bothered her. Now and then he had talked of going away to a big city, where there were more opportunities, he said. But he had agreed to take her with him. Now they must decide.

After she had washed the dishes and finished her work, she went to the telephone and called up the drug store. In her imagination she could see handsome Art Looker as he walked down the aisle behind the counter, go behind the partition, step into the little telephone booth where orders were received, and take off the receiver.

"Hello, Art!" she called when there was an answer. "Listen. This is Nettie." Could she meet him somewhere this evening, at nine, when he was through his work? It was something important.

But Art wasn't sure. He had to work late tonight. Besides, he didn't think it would be wise. The whole town knew it. They would have to watch their step . . . for a while. He loved her just as much as ever, but they must not see each other, anyway not just now.

Nettie turned heavily away from the telephone. So he was failing her, too, Art Looker, the one she had depended on. . . .

Then she began to talk to Tommie—Tommie, her darling.

The third day later it happened.

Connie was on the second floor, doing her "upstairs" work. As she was guiding the electric sweeper over the floor, with the thunderous noise that it always made in an upstairs room, the telephone rang. Downstairs, Mrs. Webb was undergoing the process of getting ready to start downtown to do the family marketing. How many times Connie had seen her herd the twins into the kitchen, dab their faces with a wet rag, and then get out the black fish-net bag and start down the street with the bag dangling at her side. Three-quarters of an hour later she would heave into sight again with the black bag stretched to twice its length and with the twins deploying ahead, around, and behind her like torpedo destroyers. And then dumping the groceries on the table, Mrs. Webb would proceed to tell how some tradesman had tried to get the best of her. But that individual hadn't been born yet.

"It's Floto," Connie thought with a strange and terrifying calmness. "At last it has happened." And for a moment it did not seem to be herself at all who was marching to her doom, but some one she could look at impersonally. And yet a clearer half of her brain told her that it was herself and that the moment had come.

Connie had been waiting with the vain hope that after all Floto would say nothing more about it and that maybe in some miraculous way things would turn

out right, after all. Maybe he would die; sometimes she had heard of such things, of desperate situations being solved in this way. . . . Why, lots of times she had read it in stories.

Connie turned off the sweeper with her foot; the hum of the motor died down and the bag suddenly wilted.

"I suppose it had just as well be now as any time," she thought on the way downstairs.

But she must wait till Mrs. Webb, now standing in the front door with her black bag, had got outside. But Mrs. Webb did not go outside—not Mrs. Webb. She turned back toward the telephone.

"I'll take it," called Connie, desperately.

"Don't mind, dear. I'll take it."

It was not quite a race, but each moved quickly and yet pretending not to be hurrying at all. Mrs. Webb won and seated herself elaborately at the chair before the little table in the sitting room where the telephone rested, pulled off the receiver, and cleared her throat.

"Hello! Yes, this was Main 89. Who? Just a minute."

Her hand went over the receiver.

"Your New York friend wants you." Her hand came off the receiver, her voice rose: "Wait a minute. Here she is."

Connie's heart pounded dully. If she could only delay a moment, Mrs. Webb would be outside. Bending over, she straightened a rug, she picked up a newspaper from a chair and folded it; but Mrs. Webb, now

on the scent, retreated to the kitchen and began softly tiptoeing about.

"Hello!" Connie heard herself say inconsequentially into the receiver.

"Hullo, Con!" He hoped he hadn't disturbed her, but could he see her today? Would she come down to the store and they'd talk things over? He didn't want to be snooty about it, but he just had to have the money —he had promised it to Mr. Givens and had to make good. The sharp, nasal voice continued.

She heard herself saying "Yes" and "No." Once she laughed—with her hand over the transmitter—while she was conscious of every move that Mrs. Webb made. Mrs. Webb had now come out of the kitchen and was meticulously examining a hole in her fish-net bag.

"Certainly, Mr. Floto," she said, while her agonized mind thought, "Oh, why doesn't she go?" "Mr." Floto, and when he had first come she had called him "Ed"!

"You just keep stalling me along," the tinkle said in her ears. "I think I have been damned decent about it." She had the money, the tinkle continued—look at the big party she pulled the other night—and here he was caught in a corner all for a little chicken feed.

"Did you think the party was nice?" How quickly her mind worked. *Would Mrs. Webb never go?* Now she had gone back to the kitchen for a little wooden handle. *Would she never come back?* "Allen has been trying to make music come out of the saw ever since." Now she had dashed Mrs. Webb's sus-

picions; she was actually moving toward the door. No, she had forgotten her list.

"Will you come down to the store today?" Floto was now saying.

She knew what the scene would be like. He would greet her with the effusiveness that he always had. Why, hullo, Con! Didn't she think they were fixed up pretty nice? He would talk a few minutes and then jerk his head. "Come on back. Now, looky here, Con," he would say when they were in the rear of the store, "you can't play this waitin' game any longer."

"Yes, I'll come," declared Connie.

Mrs. Webb, still suspicious, was now starting down the front steps with the deliberation of an invalid leaving a hospital. Connie continued to act her gay, smiling part as she delivered noncommittal words into the telephone. As Mrs. Webb went out on the porch she pulled the receiver down with her thumb.

"Sure I'll come to see your store," she declared. "I don't think we want anything just yet—"

She finished and hung up the receiver and went to the door. Mrs. Webb was now on the steps.

"He wants us to come and see his store, sometime. He says he's getting it fixed up fine," she called.

What should she do? Floto had grown bolder; he had now demanded that she come to the store and see him. Where would it end? She had the sensation, so common of late, that this was really not happening to her at all, but to some character on a stage that she pitied intensely. And yet she knew that it was reality.

A moment later, over the roaring of the sweeper, she heard the door bell. She glanced at the clock. Yes, it was the mail man; he always pushed the button when he put the mail into the little black box on the wall; but he had rung again. Strange.

"Good morning, Mrs. Webb," he greeted her when she went down. "I've got a registered for you. Will you sign?" He held out the book. "Nice morning, isn't it?"

A registered letter. From whom could it be? Aloud she said, "Yes, it's a fine morning, indeed." In reality she had hardly noticed the morning at all.

Connie stood holding the thick, mysterious, important-looking letter in her hand, after the carrier had gone down the street. She stared at the faint purple register mark on the front of the letter, with a number written in ink in the blank space. On the back were two heavy seals, with the wax pressed into a flat surface. The letter was from St. Louis, and in the return corner was the number of the street and then "Room 702." That was all—no name, no firm, only a cold, impersonal street address and a room number. Why, she didn't know anybody in St. Louis! Strange. Maybe it was some advertising dodge. That was the latest wrinkle. Several times she had received special-delivery letters and excitedly had torn them open to find that they were from some company offering a preparation guaranteed to make her beautiful, or slim, or a brilliant conversationalist, or anything she wished.

Her heart, as she tore open the envelope, gave a happy, excited leap. Bills! Money! Suddenly she

had the feeling of being very rich, and for a moment it seemed like a dream. Money—why, there were two one-hundred-dollar bills! And other bills.

But after the first quick, unconscious reaction at sight of the money, another thought came. *Where did the money come from?* Quickly, breathlessly, and with an excited fluttering of her heart she unfolded the letter. Maybe something splendid and wonderful had happened to her. Maybe some relatives had died and a lawyer was settling up the estate. Her eyes raced along the lines. Why, it was from—she studied the signature again, and then the name leaped out at her —Katzmeier.

"Dear Madam," it began. He regretted to inform her that he had been unable to carry out his part of the agreement, due to party involved having resigned and same no longer being connected with firm, and therewith he was inclosing by registered letter cash to the sum of $290.00 which he believed was correct as per agreement, and which would constitute settlement in full. One phrase struck her—"I hope the twins are getting along ok. They must be fine." And then the letter closed. He was most truly yours, and in a cramped, almost illegible hand was the name, A. L. Katzmeier.

Connie stood staring at the letter. "I hope the twins are getting along ok. They must be fine." The effrontery of it! And then as she read the letter again she realized how much like him it was. She saw the phrases again—"due to party involved," "as per agreement," "the sum of $290.00." How like him

it was to put in the cents marks. And then she understood that he was not only honest, but was returning the money in a way least likely to embarrass her. The letter was not written on office stationery, but on a plain white sheet of paper, rather cheap, and down in the corner were the stenographer's marks of mystery —and so vague was the wording that the stenographer would suspect nothing of the arrangement; and he had used only a room number as a return address, almost like the advertisements which offered to send things sealed and unmarked. Not once had she even dreamed that he would return the money, and now as she stood with the bills in her hand she had a sudden rush of feeling for the slightly greasy, hairy, thick-jowled, harsh-voiced vulgarian. After all, according to his own code, he was honest. He had seen a chance to pick up some money, and he had taken it. It hadn't gone through and he had returned the money. That was business. How much better a man he was than Floto. In spite of his vulgarities and money-grasping there was, at bottom, something fine in him. If one were ill, or in need, he would be the first person to respond. Why, he was probably an excellent father for his liddle kits.

Even now as Connie stood with the money in her hand, she thought how fortunate it was that Mrs. Webb had not been present—Mrs. Webb who was growing more and more suspicious. Unthinking, Connie would have opened the letter before her; the bills would have tumbled out. Connie shuddered. Mrs. Webb would have been a leopard on a limb. . . .

Connie tore the envelope and letter into bits, and going into the kitchen threw them into the stove. In the summer-time the oil stove was used, but when winter came the coal stove was started to help warm the kitchen. But she must not even leave the multilated fragments where Mrs. Webb's hawk eyes would spy them, and Connie touched a match to the accumulated trash. She was safe. In a few days she would return the money to her mother.

Now was her chance, while Mrs. Webb was gone, to call up Floto.

She thought, "I could give him some of the money." Then she reflected that it would do no good. It would only be buying him off; soon he would want more. The sums would increase.

"I'm not going to give him any of it," she told herself.

In a moment she head Floto's high, sharp, nasal voice.

"Listen, Ed," began Connie. "I want to see you, but I don't want to come to your store." She was amazed at herself that she could begin a conversation so familiarly with "Listen, Ed." People would be coming into the store, she explained. It would be better to meet outside. She cast around desperately and then thought of the billboard where she had first gone to see him. The billboard was now finished and stood in landscape-marring hideousness near the road. Now and then cows came and sniffed and then went on with their grazing. Would he, she asked, ge. Mr.

Givens's car and meet her there at four o'clock this afternoon?

Sure he would.

With what amazing rapidity things were happening, Connie thought, as she went up the stairs. Only a few minutes ago she was running the thunderous suction sweeper, and now she was going up the stairs with money in her hand and with an engagement to meet Floto at the billboard. How unexpectedly and out of a clear sky these things had happened, and as she went up the steps she had the confused, terrified feeling that events were rushing with a speed and power beyond her control, and that soon, almost at any moment, the end might come. It was the kind of feeling she had had when once she had gone to Coney Island with Floto and had got into a barrel-slide and had gone swirling and ricocheting down the shaft and had been shot out on a series of tables all madly whirling. Faster and faster she had gone, first in one direction, then in another, while she had tried desperately to hold on . . . at last to be thrown off.

Connie stood with the bills in her hand. She must not take them with her to see Floto, for she might weaken and give some of the money to him. No, she must not, whatever happened, allow herself to do that. She would hide the money until she could return it to her mother. She looked about for a place secure against Mrs. Webb's hawk eyes. For a moment there arose before her the terrible scene it would make if Mrs. Webb found the money. In her imagination she could see Mrs. Webb as she stood holding the money,

staring at it with her slightly protruding eyes. . . . And also Connie knew that she must hide the money from those terrible explorers and inland Captain Kidds. Nothing seemed to give the twins quite such a deep and satisfying pleasure as to go through some closet that Connie especially wanted to keep from inroads, and to bare its innermost secret. Stowed carefully away in a locked box Connie kept the letters that Walter had written her. One day, when she returned from a golf game at the Country Club, she heard a great thundering and thumping upstairs, and had gone to find that the twins had taken the letters out of their sacred retreat and placed them along the floor a few inches apart, and were now hopping from one letter to another, joyfully playing choo-choo train!

Connie looked about and, opening a drawer, she raised up the contents and placed the bills under the paper that lined the bottom. Here they would be safe.

After Connie had finished her upstairs work and the electric sweeper had been wheeled across the floor and placed in the closet to wait till Friday, when the roaring and whining contraption would again be trundled out, she went downstairs. Soon Mrs. Webb came up the path, the black bag now stretched out like a Christmas stocking.

"Everything all right?" asked Mrs. Webb as she began disgorging the contents of the black fishnet. It was what she always asked, and it meant, "Did anything happen while I was away?"

Every trifle in regard to the house was of the most

tremendous importance to Mrs. Webb, whose only interest was the family, what people thought, her foreign mission work, and the twins. If the telephone call came while she was gone, or if one of the neighbors popped in for a moment, her little starved mind must know every detail ——

"No," answered Connie. "I have just finished my upstairs work."

"But didn't the mail man come?" persisted Mrs. Webb.

Yes, he was here, Connie explained.

Mrs. Webb waited a moment while she slowly emptied the fish-net, clearing her throat in quick little hackings like—Connie thought—a hen calling her chickens.

"He didn't have anything special?"

"No."

"I met him down the street and he wanted to know if you were home—said he had a special registered letter for you and wouldn't give it to anybody else."

Connie's heart gave a terrified leap; how like her mother-in-law it was, first to ask if anything had happened, then to lead her into the trap. Another person might first have mentioned that the carrier had asked if she were at home, and have told about the registered letter, but not Mrs. Webb. No, indeed.

Oh yes, *that,* Connie heard herself answer with a a calmness that amazed her, while her heart seemed thrust into a bag greatly too small for it. Yes, the postman had brought a registered letter, but it was—and then suddenly an explanation leaped into her

mind—from the secretary of her college alumnæ association. Connie had graduated from a select girls' college, and some time ago, almost two years it was, she had received a registered letter from the alumnæ secretary asking her to attend class reunion day, and now, with almost lightning rapidity, this explanation had leaped into her mind.

"That's all it was," she finished.

It seemed funny, Mrs. Webb said, mildly, as she meticulously returned the black bag to its nail in the closet, that they would go to so much trouble just to let people know that there was to be a class reunion. Was she going?

"I suppose it makes it seem more impressive," Connie answered, brightly. "Lots of people are beginning to do that these days, and use the air mail and so on. Why, look at the registered letter we got from some person wanting to get us to buy a set of books by mail. Besides, they had received lots of such letters. . . . She continued to elaborate the idea. "I was going into the kitchen, so I just threw the letter into the stove, and as the stove was pretty full I put a match to it. No, I can't go to the reunion. How did Allen and Albert act?"

Mrs. Webb was off on her favorite subject. Pretty good, on the whole, but Allen ——

Mrs. Webb continued to buzz away.

That afternoon, at half past three, Connie started downtown. It was Walter's day to use the car; she would get it from where it was parked at the courthouse and then go to meet Floto at the billboard. If

Walter missed the car, or should ask about it, she would tell him that she had gone to see old Mrs. Hooper, and he would suspect nothing. She felt thankful that, so far, this alibi had been spared her. Not once in the times she had taken the car, without first speaking to Walter, had he suspected. That, at least, was lucky. Riding quickly upon this emotion was another of shame and humiliation. The lies she had to tell Walter! More and more they haunted her. Some husbands, she knew, would have been suspicious and watchful, but there was none of that petty mental peering on his part. He had absolute faith in Connie; nothing else mattered. It never entered his consciousness to suspect. That is, until recently. Now and then, as Mrs. Webb said little things, he had thought some of them "queer." But that was all.

This lovely, implicit confidence made her forced duplicity all the harder to bear. Sometimes she felt utterly ashamed of herself. "What a low, deceitful person I am," she would think, and then the feeling would pass. Her cares would fade and to her amazement she would find herself light-hearted. One day, she met Avis Templeton at the country club and they had stood for some time laughing and chatting on the porch. Afterwards, Connie thought, as she went on to the locker-room, "Why, I was actually laughing—me!" But Avis was always good fun, however petty and envious and gossipy she might otherwise be.

A loud speaker was suspended above the door of the J. C. Radio Store and, as Connie passed, it was filling the street with horrible sounds. On the windows plac-

ards were posted announcing bargains and cut rates in radio supplies, illustrated by amusing, fantastic drawings made by Floto himself. They were clever, and several persons had stopped to look at them. Floto had talent—Connie knew that, much as she despised him. It was not his lack of ability which had kept him from succeeding in the world, but the part of his nature that sent him seeking some easy road, some short cut, to success; and his lack of character. As she saw the clever drawings, she felt a rush of pity for him. He could not see himself as she saw him—a cheap, flashy, spineless blackmailer, but as a clever, talented man whom the world had not treated fairly. He now had an opportunity to make some easy money in the new store and Connie must help him out. It was only a loan, he told himself; he would pay it back. And so he would go through life, deceiving himself, living by his wits. Where would he end?

Connie's thoughts were interrupted by the approach of Avis Templeton.

"Hello, Connie!" Avis called out and paused with the confidence of one who bears exciting news. "I suppose you heard about it."

"No, I haven't. What is it?" Connie heard herself asking.

"About Art Looker."

Connie disliked to get news from gossip-spreading Avis Templeton, but Art Looker—she must know what it was.

"No. What is it?"

"Oh, haven't you heard?" returned Avis, eager to

draw out her moment. "Why, everybody is talking about it! When I went into Yehle's they weren't talking about anything else. He didn't come down to open his store this morning, and when they called his boarding-house he wasn't there. Then they found he had left town last night. Said he had a better offer somewhere else; that's what he said." And then she gave a little laugh.

As Connie went on down the street her heart sank at thought of poor, weak, sensitive Nettie. It was Nettie who would have to stay and face it alone.

Avis was now probably going on down the street, stopping people, talking, gossiping, raising her eyebrows slightly. Oh, it was a big day for Avis. And there were many Avises in Junction City.

How quickly and suddenly it had taken place. Life was always like that—this abrupt, terrifying way things had of happening. Sometimes for days, for weeks, almost for years, life seemed a silent, glassy, cloud-painted stream. It seemed scarcely to flow; it just was a fact in one's consciousness. And then suddenly, abruptly, there would be a quick, severe swirling, a miniature whirlpool; straws and chips would be tossed and a dark, alarming, greedy, sucking mouth would open, and then the water was no longer a calm, lazy mirror, but a relentless river, flowing, moving, ever surging on. Where did it carry one? Yes, that was it—where did it carry one? And was one on it a chip, sucked down here, only to bob up some place else? The questions continued to stalk through her mind. Queer, life was. Once she had thought it

could be reduced to a formula. But now she was beginning to see how great and powerful, how elusive, how bewilderingly complicated it was. And yet, somehow, how strangely beautiful.

The car was parked where Connie expected, and getting in she sped through the town, past the red-brick jail, which did not look like a jail, but as if children should be romping and playing in the green front yard; past the depot, past the coal yards and the empty freight cars on the siding; and then into the straight stretch which led to the billboard. She had a quivering sense of fear that she had experienced once before when she knew that she was up against something which she must fight and fight alone. She had been skating on the river, in the late spring, and suddenly she heard a terrifying sound and knew that the ice was breaking behind her. For a terrible moment she seemed paralyzed, and then unexpected strength had come to her, strength that she did not know she had, and she had won over the ice. And so she would win now!

"I know I can do it," Connie said to herself, determinedly, and yet ——

"I'd like to help you, Ed, but I can't," she would say. "I haven't got the money, and I can't get it without telling Walter. Don't you see, if you tattled on me, that the town would turn against you? Of course they would come down on me, but after all you are only opening an old scar. After the first sensation the town would scorn you. Nobody would come into your store. . . ." The sentences kept building up.

Lovers' Leap came in sight, and she was suddenly tempted to get out and walk up its grassy slopes, higher and higher—till there was only the nest of rocks below. Here on this grassy slope she and Walter had picnicked together. Oh, those happy, joyous, lilting days so long, so long ago!

And now, as the cliff towered above her, with a few wisps of bushes clinging to its gray bleak sides, she had the feeling, suddenly, of seeing something falling through the air and yet not seeing it.

"It can't be anything," she told herself, and yet her heart began to race.

She drew up the car and, getting out, started toward the rugged cliff, beautiful in the bright sunlight. The rest happened with dizzying suddenness.

There, as she parted the bushes—a body—moans—a crumpled figure lying pitifully tumbled about, as if a doll had fallen out of a tree top. Nettie! Nettie lying limply, almost beautifully, on the bare brown rocks.

Connie raised the flaxen head . . . down one cheek a ragged line of red flowed. The big, baby-blue eyes opened, closed again. Then a soft flutter.

She heard herself cry, "Oh, Nettie, what have you done?"

"I—I know who you are," came a faint, far-away voice, then a ghostly, suffering smile. "It's you, Mrs. Webb."

Connie took the white, slender, little hand, with its gold wedding ring.

"I wish I was l-like you," said Nettie, faintly. The

soft curtain of her eyes, with its long hazel lashes and thin tracing of veins, drew down again. "So good."

The rest was a dream, a strange, terrible, vivid dream, in which some person strangely like herself but really not herself at all, rushed out and honked wildly. At last this same person saw a farmer tie his team and come slowly toward her, like the slow motion pictures at the theater, in which the person seemed hardly to move at all.

"Air you in trouble, lady?"

She pointed to the nest of rocks.

More of that same troubled, vivid dream—getting the warm body through the fence, into the car. "You drive," commanded Connie, and put her arm about Nettie. The farmer sat with his big brown, baked paws on the wheel, and now after the first shock he was talkative. At last something exciting had happened in his little world.

Yes, he knowed Nettie's husband—had a job down at the waterworks. Why, he'd talked to him day before yesterday; wasn't very work-brittle, still he guessed he was all right. Nettie was a fine, nice-looking woman to do such a crazy thing. Too bad. But maybe they could save her yet. Lots of times the hospital people pulled bad cases out. His voice lowered and he half turned his head to whisper:

"Usual thing, I suppose?"

At the hospital an interne came out in his white coat, a wheeled wagon was brought, a creaking elevator moved slowly up, then the nuns in their gray gowns

and white caps, their faces so strangely sweet. A doctor came softly down the corridor.

More confusion, doors opening, lights turned on in a big, tiled room; the halls now suddenly full of people; the sound of footsteps on the rubber runners . . . the door closed, a faint far-away murmur. At last the door opened again—the doctor himself, now in a white gown and wearing brown rubber gloves.

"I'm sorry to tell you——" It was all Connie heard. She knew the rest.

A thing that touched Connie, when they went to the house after Nettie's death, was a note pinned to the wire that supported the canary cage.

Will somebody please take care of Tommie for me and be good to him? N. M.

Connie was moved by the note, for suddenly she saw the long, lonesome hours Nettie had passed with Tommie, talking to it, mothering it. Any other person might have scribbled the note in long hand, but even in this last anguished moment Nettie's office training came out, and she had written it neatly and carefully on the typewriter before she had pinned it to the wire. In the side of the cage was a fresh cuttlebone.

Connie thought that Walter would feel guilty and regret the sternness that had caused this tragedy. "He really drove her to it," she thought. If Walter had not been so relentless—reminding her, in a way, of the grim, cruel prophets of the Old Testament—

Nettie might still be alive. He would realize what he had done and his heart would be softened. And then, maybe, she could tell him of her own mistake.

But there was no such contriteness on Walter's part. He was shocked when Connie hurried to his office after the news at the hospital, and there was the boundless, instant sympathy he had for any creature in trouble or on whom affliction had laid its heavy hand, but he could not see himself as the one to blame.

"Of course I'm sorry; naturally, anybody would be; but"—and his lips drew down—"she brought it all on herself. I warned her. She knew what she was doing. She chose the wrong road and she had to pay for it. It always works out that way."

Rooted in his mind was the biblical dictum that the wages of sin is death. How horrible, how untrue Connie knew this to be in a world where the wicked are often the most prosperous and where often the deserving have the crusts. And what was sin? The world was full of talk about sin, sin everywhere. It seemed to be any sex pleasure which the world didn't approve of. The rest was crime. And there was much more babble about sex than crime. Was sin the fact that poor, romance-starved Nettie wanted excitement and admiration and found it in Art Looker? The forces behind Nettie were so much greater and more powerful than she, that she was not really to blame. She was only a leaf tossed in the wind.

But Walter saw none of that. Nettie was a "married woman"—a phrase he was addicted to; she had responsibilities; she should have been above tempta-

tion. What would the world come to if everybody did that? If he had it to do over again, he'd do the same thing—fire her. His lips shut like a pair of scissors.

"If he had lived in Salem he would have been a witch-burner," Connie thought.

While she was most bitter Walter went to the undertaker.

"Send me the bill," he said. "I'll look after it."

How like Walter it was—unyielding, unforgiving, Puritan Walter—but the one person in Junction City willing to pay out money for Nettie.

The day of the funeral came.

Connie had thought that Mrs. Webb would stay at home and take care of the twins, but, no—Mrs. Webb could not miss such a grand emotional debauch—and so Mrs. Meloney, one of the neighbors, was engaged to come in and do as much as a human being could to keep the house from being wrecked.

"Good-by, darlings," Connie called as she started down the street. "Mamma wants you to be good boys today."

"Yes, mumsie, we will," they said, like angels.

The funeral was the sensation of Junction City, almost the biggest and finest sensation Junction City had enjoyed since Omaha Charlie had been taken out and lynched on the railroad trestle. The town was enjoying Nettie's funeral immensely, but of course, being polite, it pretended not to enjoy it. But the world had made some progress, give it credit for that. Once it would not have allowed a suicide's funeral in

a church. It would have been conducted silently, almost secretly, from the person's home. Old tales were told of pioneer days when Junction City had been little more than a trading-post. There was Squire Evans's daughter who killed herself, and her funeral was conducted at night. But before that, in England, suicides had been dumped into the grave and stakes driven through their hearts. . . .

Connie had been asked to sing, and as she stood before the congregation her heart beat with feverish anguish for the silent little figure in the coffin with its faced turned partly to one side to hide the bruising of the bare, brown rocks.

People wormed their way up and down the aisles. The undertaker, in his long black coat, tiptoed ponderously about; he raised his hand, gave a signal, then tiptoed ponderously away again. The minister, young and appropriately solemn, sat in the high-backed chair, his hands laced in his lap. Queer how bright and entertaining he could be at an oyster supper, with the sisters fluttering about him, and now so solemn. But he was something of an actor, as all ministers are.

Connie's eyes came to rest on Floto. She had expected to see him take it lightly—it would be only an exciting event—but it brought up another side of his nature. He was genuinely affected. "My God! think of it!" he said when he heard the news. Other men might talk and whisper about it, but it had touched something deep and genuine in him. In fact, Floto himself had "looked Nettie over"; but since she was dead he was sincerely moved. He had brought a

wreath and placed it on the coffin, and now sat in the congregation, strangely silent. Connie saw the deep emotion on his face, and hope rose in her. Now, that he had seen the consequences of such a thing, maybe he would make no more demands on her.

One of those who enjoyed the funeral was Avis Templeton. On a pretext of wanting to see if she could do something for Nettie, she had marched through Nettie's little home, her eyes taking in every detail, and she had found the celluloid frame with Art Looker's picture in it. It was Sutter's gold to her. She would have gossip enough to last her for days.

Mrs. Webb enjoyed the funeral, too. But instead of sitting with glittering eyes, the way Avis Templeton did, she moved about, trying to be helpful. She looked to see if everybody had song books. Once she rose and wormed her way along the packed seat, straightened out a wreath which was leaning against the foot of the trestle, and then complacently worked her way back.

"I'm not surprised," Mrs. Webb had said, grimly, when she was told. "People can't get away from their sins."

Never in her life had Connie so put her heart into a song. Tears lashed at her eyes, but some professional part of her kept them back. "Nettie, poor Nettie!" she thought, and then: "It's all over; she won't suffer any more."

The beat of the slow, powerful moving music swept over the congregation. The audience stirred. At last she finished. The bright young minister unlocked his hands and slowly opened the Bible and preached a

sermon about something or other—fine, splendid, empty words they were—but nothing about Nettie, the human being.

The undertaker stepped pompously forward again, the throb of the organ rose. . . .

There were not many to follow the body to the cemetery. That would take time, and, besides, the real excitement was over. But one of the persons to go was Floto.

"Such a thing is terrible," he said in a constrained voice as they left the heaped grave. "It's going to be lonesome for her husband to stay in that house tonight. Somebody ought to take him in for a while." And during the day Floto found some one to take the husband in for a few days.

At last the funeral was over and Connie came back home, while Walter returned to his office. She had hoped Walter would soften when he saw the results of his attitude toward Nettie, but now she knew he never would. Nothing could ever change him. Precious, loveable, adamant Walter.

Connie left Walter at the office, and then drove home in the car, her mind reverting over and over again to the funeral. In spite of its pretense, the town had enjoyed it. What a sensation there would be if the town ever found out about herself!

Connie parked the car and came slowly up the cement walk to the front door. Mrs. Webb, returning directly from the church, had let Mrs. Meloney go home and was now in charge of the twins. As Connie climbed the stairway she heard a rumble, a murmur

of voices, and she felt a suppressed excitement. Something was happening in her room.

The room was torn up as she entered; the twins were having a glorious time. Chairs were turned over on the floor; evidently some sort of bridge had been built. Over the mirror a coating of her face powder had been dabbed and pictures drawn on it. But there was something else ——

One of her bureau drawers had been pulled out by the twins and was now turned topsy-turvy.

"Look, what this is!" said Mrs. Webb. "The children found it and were playing with it."

Triumphantly she held up the bills.

Chapter Ten

MRS. WEBB stood holding the bills, her eyes staring at them in amazement from behind her gold-rimmed glasses. Money! So much money! Where did it come from? Whose was it?

Connie had a curious sense of sinking; suddenly breathing was hard and yet she was strangely calm. She would say that her mother had sent the money to her to have some studio photographs made of the twins. But there was too much money for that. Nor could she say that her mother had sent the money for Connie to buy clothes for herself, after the spending spree she had gone on.

The twins were now swarming about the money, as they always did about any center of attraction, while Allen, the darling, wanted to know how many lollipops it would buy.

"Lots of them," Connie heard herself say with an air of carelessness. "A hatful, I expect."

"Mamma sent it to me to put toward Walter's new car," Connie lied glibly, and Allen, carried away with the prospect of the bliss of a hatful of lollipops, executed a triumphal dance and clapped his hands as if Santa Claus had suddenly and miraculously burst into the room.

There had been family talk of Walter getting a

new car, and it had flashed into Connie's mind with a quickness and aptness that amazed her.

"Will a hatful make me sick?" Allen clamored.

"But I didn't want him to know," Connie continued. It was going to be a surprise for him; yes, it was going to be a surprise, she repeated. "Yes, Allen, a hatful would make you very sick. Now don't bother mamma any more."

"Was that what was in the special registered letter the other day?" asked Mrs. Webb in her toneless voice.

Connie thought how much like Mrs. Webb this was —apparently to accept an explanation and then quietly carry it in her mind with growing doubts, saying no word . . . waiting. Like a cat at a mouse hole, Connie thought.

"Yes, that was it," answered Connie with a great effort at casualness. "I said it was from the alumnæ secretary so that nobody would know. I—I wanted to keep it as a surprise."

The protruding, unblinking eyes continued to stare at Connie. It was nice that Connie's mother was so thoughtful—such a nice surprise, too. Of course, she wouldn't say anything about it—not until they had bought the car—and the twins mustn't say anything about it, either. The protruding, unblinking eyes turned upon them.

At last it was over, and a frightened, tense Connie found herself stuffing yellow bills into her purse.

Mrs. Webb was now going downstairs, her mind seemingly no longer concerned with the amazing dis-

covery of the money. It was now the twins. That Mrs. Meloney woman who had been trying to look after them had let the children pull all the chairs out onto the porch where everybody passing could see them. In a moment Connie heard Mrs. Webb dragging the chairs back into house. Now people passing along the street wouldn't stop and stare at them.

A week passed and Connie began to grow more hopeful about Floto. He had been touched by the tragedy at Lovers' Leap. There rose in her mind the picture of Floto at the funeral, deeply and sincerely moved. He had sent the finest floral piece, and now after the funeral he continued to be generously kind to Nettie's husband.

"I expect he gets the creeps, stickin' around the house all on the lonesome," Floto said, and invited him to, as he said, "hang out at the store." Coming home from the waterworks, Nettie's husband would leave his car at the lonely house, change into his "good clothes," and then hurry to the radio shop, where there were life and movement and that which passed for music. Floto told him fun stories, he slapped him on the back, and brought him into the conversation.

Nettie's husband rather enjoyed being the center of things; he was the town martyr, and people noticed him who apparently had never before known of his existence. Connie saw this unexpected side of Floto's nature, and hope began to rise. After all, Floto was human. There were many nice things about him. She recalled the time in Greenwich Village when he had

been unexpectedly kind to the child who had been run down on the street. Maybe now, after the course Nettie had taken, he would no longer persecute her. She would see him again—appeal to him—make him promise to stop blackmailing her.

But Connie did not know the warped idea that was working its way through Floto's brain. Truly enough, he had been stirred by the tragedy at Lovers' Leap, but he drew no parallel with Connie. He could get no glimpse of it through Connie's eyes, and could not imagine Connie herself paying such a penalty. He needed the money, Connie had it, or could get it if she wanted to, and she could help him out of his trouble.

"And besides, I'll pay it back; it's only a loan," he told himself.

At first he had felt some qualms—it wasn't quite the chummy thing to do; but soon these pinpricks were gone. Trouble began to pile up. He had promised Mr. Givens to put another payment into the store. He hadn't been able to meet this, and Mr. Givens was beginning to press him. And now after the first shock of the funeral, and the newness of taking care of Nettie's husband had worn off, he began to think again about Connie and the help her "loan" would be to him.

"I've got to have it," he repeated to himself, "and I'm going to get it."

Also, Floto had another feeling. The store was not the get-rich-quick scheme he had visioned it as he had dangled on the painter's cradle. He had expected the money to come rolling in, but it wasn't roll-

ing at all. Barely dribbling. The store meant long hours behind the counter. It wore on him who for so long had been able to go and come as he wished. No longer could he stand on the street of an evening and ogle the girls. Pretty tough, it was.

One day the secretary of the Chamber of Commerce gave him something to think about. A man had come through town and had selected a location for a new chain radio store. When Floto brought the news to Mr. Givens, Mr. Givens showed alarm. They must get the jump on the other store.

Where was that money?

Floto called up Connie. He must see her. The blackmailing had begun again.

Connie had the feeling of sinking as she stood at the telephone. That slightly nasal voice, with its way of running up at the end of a sentence, those mannerims—they had begun to haunt her even in her sleep. But fortunately Mrs. Webb was out with the children and Walter was at his office.

Say, he wanted to see her. He didn't want to get snooty (how she hated the word!), but still something had to be done. She better jump into the car and meet him at the billboard, like they had tried to before, and then they could chew the rag without anybody buttin' in. "You better do it," he finished.

"Yes, I'll come."

Connie turned weakly from the telephone. The time had come. . . .

She was to meet him at four, and a little before the hour she started heavily and wearily downtown,

going over and over in her mind what she would say. What if, at the last moment, the car was not there? She could take a taxi part way, and walk the rest, suspicious as that would be. But the car was standing patiently on the north side of the Square, where Walter always parked it, and only a few feet from where she had met Floto a little more than a month ago when she had gone to buy the colored hatband. A month! It seemed ages.

As she drove along she saw people, and yet she did not see them. Once in Kansas City she had seen a vaudeville hypnotist and mind-reader sit on the seat of a carriage, blindfolded, and drive the carriage down a crowded street, turning out, meeting cars, and going through all the maneuverings of driving, without seeing anything at all. And so now she seemed to be driving, as she sent the car along.

She must appeal to the better side of Floto; she must make him see that even if he informed her husband, or told the town, that after the first shock the town would turn against him. How desperately she would appeal to his manhood; but a calmer self told her that he had no real manhood. And it would mean nothing to him if the town came down on him. If it did, and if things became unpleasant, the rolling stone would simply move on again, and destruction would be behind him.

Such an appeal would do no good. She must find something else.

The abrupt, ragged bluff of Lovers' Leap rose before her, and again she saw that silent, bruised form on the brown stones, and the tragedy of it again came to

her—of the pathetic note pinned to the canary cage. And again Connie thought of the leap that she herself had made in Greenwich Village, as wild and almost as desperate as the one poor Nettie had made. How foolish and absurd it was for a girl to do such a thing.

And now, as she sped along, an idea which had been growing, again rose persistently in her mind, an idea which at first she had put aside as impractical, but which kept returning. It was that instead of appealing to his manhood and throwing herself on his callous mercies, she would act a part before him. She would tell him that she was tired of the pettiness of small-town life, and that Walter neglected her, and that she wanted to leave Junction City and all it meant—and that she would go with him. She would explain that she had already told Walter of what had happened in Greenwich Village, but that Walter had grown so careless of her affection lately that he had not cared. The only thing that interested him now was his career. Then she would ask Floto to take her with him and go to some new place and set up their lives together. She would depend on the certainty that he would not want to do this and that he would leave in an effort to escape her.

Could she play such a rôle? She had taken part in amateur theatricals, and once had been the leading lady in a gay play which the young spirits of the town had put on.

But she could not play such a part in the few minutes which they would have at the billboard, with the constant fear that some one would pass who knew them.

Then the tongues would begin to wag. No, she must have a background. Tonight would be a good time. It was Mrs. Webb's night. Once every two weeks Mrs. Webb solemnly played bridge with three of her cronies, came home, solemnly drank a cup of warm milk, and went to bed. And also tonight was initiation night at the Masonic lodge, and Walter was on the initiation team and would be out till late. She would play the part tonight.

When she came up, Floto was waiting beside the billboard.

"Hello, Con!" he said. How was every little thing? He came closer, his voice hardened, the slight animal snarl—did she have it?

"Listen, Ed," she began. "I want you to come to see me this evening, at the house. Mrs. Webb won't be there, and Walter will be away. There are some things I want to tell you. Will you come?"

He hesitated. Well, he supposed so. But it was just gumming up the game. What time?

In a minute it was all over and Connie sped away. No one had seen the cars stop, no one suspected.

Connie drew the car into place where Walter had parked it. Walter had not come for the car, and she breathed a sigh of relief that it had not been missed. There would be one less lie to tell. How this ladder of lies continued to mount. As she told them she was amazed that she, Connie Webb, who had always been so free from small deceits, could stoop to such subterfuge. Often she had read in the papers of people who lived a model life for years, respected by the com-

munity, suddenly doing something that outraged the town. One had been a bank cashier who had absconded. How the town had come down on him, this meek, quiet soul behind the grill-work! Now she knew that his downfall must have come about little by little. When he started he had probably been no worse than some of the people now loudest in condemning him. The cashier had had a wife who loved pretty clothes, she had wanted to be a leader . . . the crash . . . then the crucifixion. And now Connie's heart went out to all these people caught in the trap of life. What tragedies they must have lived, what agonies they must have suffered before the final day. And then, thought Connie, how peaceful the day must have seemed.

Evening came.

Connie could hear Mrs. Webb up in her room, walking back and forth, getting ready to start to her bridge game. Back and forth. Each time she came near the bureau a misfitted floor board gave a slight squeak. How many times Connie had heard that slight irritating squeak. She had spoken to Mrs. Webb about it —would she step over it? But Mrs. Webb never did. The board didn't squeak very loudly, Mrs. Webb said. Connie shouldn't pay any attention to it. It was just a sign of nervousness, that was all. And she would persist in carelessly treading on it.

At last she came down the stairs, clearing her throat with the series of hems and haws that seemed for her the necessary prelude to speech.

"Be sure to see that Albert doesn't throw his covers off," she said, as she always did to Connie, with the quiet assumption before Walter that Connie wasn't quite capable of looking after her own children.

At the door she paused.

"I may be back early tonight. I feel all tired out after my long day in the kitchen." A sigh escaped her —a subtle insinuation that she and not Connie was the one who did the kitchen work.

"Good night, Walter. I wish you didn't have to go out tonight. You're working so hard now."

The door closed, but a moment later it was pushed open again.

"Connie, those things you left on the clothes line are still there." The laundress had come that day, and Connie had brought in all the washing except a few towels and odds and ends, which she sometimes left out all night. But Mrs. Webb never liked it. "They'll be flapping on the line in the morning where everybody can see them. I expect I'm a little late now."

Again the door shut. The creature was gone.

Walter was in his most genial mood as he put his initiation clothes into his suitcase. Tom Uzzell had been in again that day. Things were shaping up splendidly. Washington! It was just too good to think of.

"Think of that, Connie, ol' girl, you and me walking up and down Pennsylvania Avenue and meeting the big-bugs and acting as if we belonged there! Pretty nice, *nicht wahr?*"

Walter's buoyant moods always lifted Connie, and

it was one of the pleasures of her life that they could build their castles together. A feeling of emotion swept over her, and abruptly taking his face between her hands she kissed him.

"I love you, Walter. I always will," she declared with sudden, deep feeling.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," he declared. His arm went around her, and for a moment he stood in the silent, motionless exultation. Then his face lightened, he smiled again. Gee whiz! he was sorry to leave her alone this evening. If he'd known it, he'd have tried to wiggle out.

It was all right, she said; she didn't mind it.

At the door his arm went around her again.

"And here's one to grow on," he said as he kissed her.

The door shut. Then his quick step on the porch. He was gone.

Tears welled up in Connie. She must prepare herself for the most critical moment of her life. But now as she stood wiping her eyes, with Walter's steps growing fainter, she had the feeling, which she had had as a child when something great and mountainous seemed beyond coping with, but which she must face and face alone. She wiped the tears away; she must be practical. In Junction City the window blinds were usually left up—from the days of the pioneers when a light in a window was a beacon—but now she pulled them down. No curious passer-by must stare in tonight.

But what if somebody came? Avis?

She went up stairs and dressed carefully for the part

she was to play, in her third-best gown, her hair slightly stringy. When she came down her smart look was gone; she was now the overworked housewife tied to her kitchen.

A step on the porch; a ring of the bell.

It was now dark, and at this time of night no one could see him, or, if anybody did, Floto was merely some man making a business call on her husband.

"Hullo, Connie!" he greeted her. "How's every little thing?"

Quickly she closed the door, her heart beating with deep, long strokes. He was in the checked suit which she had come to detest, and in his tie the inevitable diamond horseshoe blazed.

He stood a moment with that intent, calculating look which she had come to know so well.

"Is the coast clear?" he whispered, with a backward jerk of his thumb over the house.

"We're alone."

He turned full upon her with his leering smile. "Slip us a kiss, Con."

Again she felt the quick, hot resentment she had had for him since he had come to Junction City. Oh, the horrible dodges and subterfuges she had resorted to to evade him! And the terrible fear she had felt that Walter would discover them, or suspect. Those minutes of suffering! During this time she could not pass near him without his secretly touching her; the disgusting intimacies when he had pressed her leg or allowed his hand to rest on her, when at any moment some one might see. Thoughts of all these rushed

over her as she stood there, but now she must play another game.

"You know I mustn't," she said with the air of a girl not wishing to give in and yet secretly wanting not to appear too firm.

But Floto seized her, his arm went around her, and his hand rested on her intimately. Then the smeary kiss upon her lips.

"Oh, Ed!" she whispered as if half in fright and half in pleasure. "You mustn't. Please, d-don't."

"Sure I mustn't," he declared in his swaggering manner, and smeared her again. "I see you ain't taking any chances," he declared, jerking his thumb at the drawn curtains.

Of course she wasn't, she said. Didn't she know a small town? Gossip, that's what it lived on. And now she must appear at her ease and must make him feel that secretly she was glad he was here. The deceit of it! But she was playing for high stakes and must win.

Floto fluttered nervously about the room, here one moment, there the next, as he always did on entering a room. After a time his interest would be focused and he would sit down. He paused before the stuffed birds in their glass prison.

"Tweet! tweet!" he said.

Connie smiled her appreciation. "I hate those things," she declared. "They're Mrs. Webb's, you know. Sometimes I wish I could throw the old things at her. You know how she is, always snooping around and listening. Of course, I shouldn't talk about my

mother-in-law ——" Connie moved her hands expressively. "Well, the funny papers haven't told half," she said.

Connie began to tell about Mrs. Webb, and it was fortunate Mrs. Webb, good woman that she was in many respects, was not there to hear the creature that Connie built up. The shock might have been fatal.

A few moments later Connie managed to tell how Walter neglected her; he was always going off to lodge meetings and leaving her at home to look after the children, she said. It wasn't very pleasant, after a long day in the kitchen. "I have to do all my own cooking, you know," she added. "And his mother encourages him in it," she declared. "They are always banding against me—the two of them."

Floto was now in Walter's big easy-chair, under the lamp, with one leg dangling over the arm of the chair, a favorite position with him. His eyes wandered toward the candy box.

"Excuse me for forgetting," said Connie and, picking up the box, she brought it and stood close beside him. "Shut your eyesies and open your mouthie."

She popped one in.

There was a slight crunching, while his eyes moved over her. Then she went back and sat down.

He now began to talk about his troubles. The radio store hadn't been any great shakes. Old-man Givens was makin' a lot of trouble; wanted to run everything his own way and bellyaching around if he so much as stepped outside the door to push some fresh air into his lungs. Givens was a mess of spinach, if there ever was

one. Then the chain radio store had come along, and it would gum up things in fine shape. In fact, he was just about ready to throw the whole kit and boodle overboard and try something else. Maybe he might blow out to Los Angeles and get a job in the scene-painting or *papier-mâché* department of the movies. Out there they'd treat a fellow right. They appreciated a good man.

But it would take money to get out there. Then he would have to have enough to hang on a while till he got things going.

Los Angeles! Connie heard the words in a breathless haze. This was better than she had hoped. If she could once get him out of Junction City, then at least she would be safer. After a time he would probably lose interest in her, his roving eyes would fall on other girls. He would give her up as a hope of getting money; he would pass from her life.

He expected she thought he was as low as a snake's belly, but he wasn't. He had got himself in an awful jam about the radio store and had to have it. But it was just a loan. That was all. He would return it, absolutely.

He turned to her.

"You got it for me all right, ain't you, Con?"

The moment of her supreme effort had come.

"Listen, Ed," said a strange voice which didn't seem to be hers at all. "I've got something to tell you. It's something I never told anybody else. It's—" Suddenly there was a dash of tears to her eyes, a refreshing flood. But now she could not hide behind phrases

any longer. "Walter isn't what I thought he was before we were married," she confessed.

There wasn't another woman in the case; she almost wished there was. It was just Walter, dull, phlegmatic, uninteresting Walter. He kept her pinned down in this hole of a town and never gave her any spending money—it was so necessary these days for women to have money. She continued to build up her ogre. In some ways Walter was all right; he always treated company nicely; but when the door was shut—Connie sighed expressively. Connie felt as if she were in some play, and she let herself go more than if it were really true, for in the big moments of life there is, curiously enough, little acting.

She was now on the arm of his chair, and as she talked she began to weave her fingers through the hair over his ears.

"All he thinks of is his office," she continued, "and I want to go places. I'm young—only thirty-one," she declared, deliberately. "I want to have a little fun in life, not just to be his housekeeper. Yes," repeated Connie, "a housekeeper he begrudges every nickel to. I'm tired of it," she cried, "tired, tired!"

She saw Floto looking at her with unbelieving eyes. It had seemed impossible when she had started, she had taken a desperate chance, but now with her acting and with the conviction that she threw into it, he was slowly being convinced. She had thought it all over; one reason why she hadn't given him the money was that she wished to make certain in her own mind that she wanted to make the plunge. But now she was sure.

"Of course, I have told Walter about—about what happened before I was married." She looked at him steadily. "He knew there was another man, that was all, but he didn't know it until you came. He wasn't even jealous."

Connie sighed heavily, as if to say, "If he only had a little more spunk."

In a moment Connie was talking about the wonderful days in New York, the theaters.

"I wish I could go to gay parties again," she cried, "instead of these terrible frosts we have here. Bridge, bridge, bridge, that's all it is—the men yawning, and husbands and wives quarreling over their hands." She sighed; her hands went up to her eyes. "That's the reason—Can't you understand why I am sick of it all? Can't you make it easy for me to tell you?"

Floto did not understand. "You mean——"

"I mean"—and suddenly she threw her arms around his neck—"this. That's what I mean," she finished.

How bitter it was to do this, she said, to humiliate herself so; but he must understand. She had tried to fight it off, she had tried to keep him from touching her, but now—well, anything was better than going on as she was.

"Look what the kitchen has done for me!" she cried. "My hands—dish-water hands, that's what they are. That's what my life in Junction City is," she declared, now stirred by the sheer acting of it, "a dish-water life. Three times a day, and it will be a dish-water life as long as I live." She was now in his

lap and her arms were about his neck. "I want to get away from here. I want to go with *you.*"

Floto blinked.

"With *me?*"

"Yes, to Los Angeles! Oh, you don't know how my heart jumped when you said Los Angeles."

Maybe he could help her get a job in the movies. Her experience in amateur theatricals in Junction City would be helpful. She told about those parts.

But Floto was not certain—er—er ——

Now she was talking about the twins. Maybe Walter would let her have them part of the time. She felt Floto wince. "Of course, Walter won't do it now, while he's mad, but later. You'll like them; I know you will." Her mother soul expanded. "You see, Walter's mother loves them; she's always been with them. She can cook for Walter—just as I am doing now—and take care of them, or maybe get a maid to help. It isn't any hasty decision," she assured him. "I've been thinking it over for days."

Floto wasn't sure. Of course he would like to have her, but—er—the expense. He must think about that.

"If people really love each other, they can always find money," cried Connie. "Love is the thing that must come first." Her voice grew tense. "I know we can find a way, Ed," she declared. "Walter can arrange a divorce and then I can have you for all mine. I know that sounds bold, but we must face it squarely."

It was a splendid piece of acting—not overdone; she must be careful of that; just enough. The gradual disillusionment about Walter; he had never been out-

side of Junction City in his life, except on automobile tours to Denver and the mountains, while she had seen a bigger world. Naturally, he was content to be shut up in a poky town.

"I feel as if I am a bird shut up in a cage—and you are the one to open the door."

It was mawkish sentiment, but it was in Floto's language; he could understand it. She seized his hand, which was slightly sticky.

"Will you open the door?"

Of course he would, but——

She brought in some poor coffee, slightly slopped on his saucer, and some dry cakes.

"Isn't this chummy?" she asked as they sat by the unshaded light. "Like the old days. Weren't we happy then?" Her hand sought his. "Of course," she admitted, "psychologists say that the past can never be restored, but I know we can bring it back. Can't we, darling?"

"Y-yes."

Floto sat staring, now and then licking his fingers.

But he wanted the money, simply had to have it, that was all, he said.

"I can give you some," explained Connie. "I can give you two hundred dollars, but that is all I can raise now. That will get you out there, then after you have got work you can send for me. We mustn't go out together. You must go first."

Connie rattled on about that, and as she talked she saw Floto grow more and more quiet and thoughtful. Bit by bit she brought out other things, too.

The money which she would have to have for clothes, especially if she expected to get a job in the movies. Girls applying for jobs in the movies couldn't afford to look shabby. . . . She came back to the two hundred again. She would have it in a few days; she was going to get it from her mother. He must take it, but of course he would have to send her more to get to California on. But she would be awfully saving. In a year or two they ought to be getting along nicely.

"Why didn't you tell me that in the first place? Why have you been stringing me along so?"

He mustn't be cross with her now, after she had been so—well, bold. But she hadn't said anything because she wanted to make certain. It meant a lot, giving up her twins—anyway, for the time being—and everybody she knew.

"But I'm ready," declared Connie and again her arms went around his neck.

At last Floto rose. He must go. They'd talk it over again.

"Good-by, kid," he said at the door.

But a different Floto left. He was no longer the flashy, confident, demanding Floto, but a subdued, hesitating one. Connie felt a flood of exultation. She had planted the idea; there would have to be other meetings; she would again have to enact the part—and again she had an unclean feeling—but she would succeed. His store was not the rosy promise he had expected, his chance of getting money from Connie was gone, Walter had been told. Yes, things would be much better in California. Why, he would get rich

in the movies! But Connie knew that after she had given him the money, and after he had got out there, with its harvest of girls, he would never send her the money. A few letters would be exchanged, he might make a few threats, then it would be the end.

Connie felt a buoyant lightness and her heart danced within her. She had not succeeded, but the wedge had been inserted.

Connie remembered that in plays, after a wife had had a meeting with the other man, how something was always forgotten. Cigarettes—of the peculiar brand which the other man was addicted to—were a favorite. How many scenes had turned on carelessly left cigarette stubbs! Another favorite was the glove. And for a moment she thought what a blow it would be to drama if the other man neither smoked nor wore gloves. It was staggering. She herself would make no such mistake, and carefully she went over the room removing every trace. She gathered up the cigarette butts and the brown papers from the candy which Floto had consumed, and carried them out and dropped them in the kitchen stove. Then she raised the blinds. Not one detail was left.

Suddenly there was a step on the porch, a fumbling at the door knob, a flash of white, and for a moment Connie had the feeling that a ghost was coming in. But over the white was her mother-in-law's round, stolid, bespectacled, fault-finding face. In her arms were the clothes which Connie had forgotten to bring in.

"Walter back yet?" she asked, mildly, as she steered a passage across the floor.

"No, not yet."

Connie heard Mrs. Webb in the kitchen putting the clothes in the basket, then the rattle of the pan on the stove as she heated her glass of milk. She could hear Mrs. Webb blowing on the milk to cool it, succeeded by slight gulps and sighs as she drank. Then the hissing of the faucet as she put the water in the pan and the glass for them to soak till morning.

Silently and without comment Mrs. Webb started up the stairs, for Mrs. Webb never offered a "Good night," only a "Good morning." How like her, Connie thought, to bring in the clothes, flirt them ostentatiously in her face, and then make no more mention of them than a martyr would of his chains. But the next morning, at breakfast, it would come out. . . . Yes, indeed.

The board in the floor squeaked; there was a silence; it squeaked again—then *squeak—squeak—squeak.* After she had finally got to bed, she would sit for a few minutes propped up by her pillows, her shoulder under the lamp on the table, reading her foreign mission magazine. Then she would snap off the light and yawn tremendously. She had had a fine, happy day, a day rich in martyrdom, and it was with gratifying approval she realized that she had repeatedly displayed that fortitude for which Christians were distinguished.

Mrs. Webb had suspected nothing.

Never had Walter seemed more appealing and

attractive than when he came in, half an hour later, genially tired and responsive. The evening had been a success, the new members had been greatly impressed.

"They're really a fine bunch of fellows," he said as he removed his uniform from the suitcase. In fact, after all, Junction City was a nice town. He had more friends here than he would ever have in a city; if, in a few years, they could go to Washington for the winter—why, it would be simply ideal. Simple, honest Walter glowed at the prospect.

He paused.

"By the way, you didn't use the car today, did you?"

"No."

That was queer, he said, because he had found a purse in it. He fished in his pocket a moment. "Here it is."

But Connie, her heart suddenly clamoring, covered quickly. Why, yes, now that she thought of it, she had used the car. The day was so long that it seemed like yesterday.

He gave her the purse.

"Where did you go in the car?" he asked, casually, as he relaxed at ease in the chair that Floto had occupied such a short time since.

"I forgot to tell you," Connie said, inconsequentially. "I drove out to see old Mrs. Hooper. She gets so lonesome, you know."

Mrs. Hooper was better today. She drew a brief, pleasant picture of the eccentric old character who lived all alone and smoked a pipe. For a time old Mrs. Hooper had enjoyed the reputation of being the

only person in Junction City who had never ridden in a car, but at last curiosity had gotten the best of her and she had weakened before Connie's urging and had intrusted herself to the uncertainties of Connie's car.

"I asked her to take another ride today, but she 'lowed as she wouldn't; but she was awfully pleased to see me," declared Connie. But a strange expression had come into Walter's eyes. He bent slightly forward.

"What time was that, Connie?"

"Oh, about four or half past, this afternoon. She fixed up some tea for me. You know how she likes her tea."

Walter's eyes seemed to come together in a strange, dancing point of light.

"What if he suspects I wasn't there?" The dreadful question leaped into her mind, and she began to enlarge on old Mrs. Hooper. Mrs. Hooper had complained about her rheumatism. "You know how she always is," continued Connie, hastily. "Said her rheumatiz had been ketchin' her ag'in." Connie, with her sense of mimicry, gave an imitation of the rheumatic old lady.

Walter swallowed slightly.

"That's the truth is it, Connie?" he asked.

"Yes, darling, of course. Why?"

Walter moved slightly forward, then spoke slowly:

"Old Mrs. Hooper died early this morning."

Old Mrs. Hooper dead!

The floor seemed to sway slightly, then sink.

Chapter Eleven

OLD Mrs. Hooper dead!

Connie heard the words in a muffled roar. Once she had been in Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, and the guide had taken them to a certain spot in the labyrinth and his words had that same, far-away and yet ringingly close quality.

Walter looked at her steadily.

"What do you mean, Connie, by saying that you saw her and that she made tea for you?"

On occasions before, when Walter had almost trapped her in a lie, Connie had heard herself talking fluently, explaining it away, laughing and making gay little fluttering gestures with her hands, but now she sat stunned and motionless.

"Didn't you know she was dead?" he repeated.

She hesitated a moment, while the room seemed to sway slightly.

"No, I didn't know it."

"Then you told me a—not the truth?"

"I intended to go; then I didn't get there."

"Why did you tell me, then, that you had been there?"

Connie heard the terrible words, while the fluttering in her heart grew worse. She didn't know exactly; she just happened to think of it, she said. She hadn't

been there for so long that she felt guilty; that was it, she supposed. . . . She continued to fill in words.

"But you were out in the car this afternoon, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Where were you, then?"

She had just driven around, that was all. She had started to go to see old Mrs. Hooper, then had turned back. She'd just run out to the Country Club, that was all.

"You didn't even go in the direction of old Mrs. Hooper's, then?"

"No, Walter."

She saw Walter move closer, and then he made the slight, involuntary contraction in his throat that he always made when he was deeply stirred. How well she knew every little sign about him, the slightest detail—and yet, as she gazed back into his eyes, he seemed a stranger.

"One of the men at the courthouse told me that he saw you down on the Arkoe road this afternoon. Were you?"

Connie did not answer.

"Listen, Connie," said Walter, his voice suddenly softening, "I don't want to put you through any third degree, but what in the name of Pete is all this mystery? You've sure got me guessing." It was now the kindly, helpful questioning he sometimes gave the twins when they had done something of doubtful merit and when he had to be their father but was trying to make

it easy for them. "What's the answer, anyway, Connie?"

She fumbled at the words and tried to explain it away, but only grew more confused. At last she paused.

"He told me that you stopped at the billboard and talked to somebody." He hadn't thought much about it at the time, Walter continued, when the man had told him; the man must have been mistaken, but—well, it certainly made things look funny.

"You didn't meet anybody at the billboard, did you?"

Connie felt herself trembling, with the same stupid, motionless terror she had once seen in a chicken. Walter was not a man to perform parlor tricks, but a few times he had taken a chicken, held its head under its wing, then drawn a line on the ground in front of the chicken's eyes and the chicken, half-hypnotized, had sat there stricken with terror.

"No," she heard herself say faintly.

That was queer, Walter said, because the man had told him that a few minutes later he had seen Floto drive away from the billboard. "How about it, Connie?"

How like Walter that was—a trait he had inherited from his mother—to know more than he pretended, and to lead a person on, and then deliberately to tell what he had been holding back. And now, at this moment, Connie saw how much like his mother Walter was. He was much bigger, a really fine, noble man, and yet there were about him some of her small traits

and the narrow point of view which she had instilled into him as a child. Much of this he had outgrown, and yet in his narrowness in regard to women (pure women, his mother called them), he had the same point of view as his mother. He would never change.

Floto! Now he had the name.

"He might have been there. I didn't see him," Connie declared.

Walter sat a moment, his lips slightly pursed, as he often sat when turning over something in his mind. How well she knew these terrible silences—the long, direct, accusing way he had of looking at one. Some men, she knew, at such moments resorted to a torrent of words, to repetitions and broken sentences, but Walter was no such person. Instead of growing excited, with a babble of words tumbling from his tongue, he became more deliberate. And now he sat, like an ominous figure in a dream, silently weighing her.

"You didn't see Floto, then?"

"No."

"It was a case of mistaken identity, somebody else, was it?"

"Yes."

"Somebody who looked like him?"

"I—I suppose so."

"Somebody who lives here?"

Connie gave a nervous, defiant laugh. "Of course, I don't know about that. Why should I know where he lives? What's all this about, anyway?"

Silence.

"Connie," came the words, deliberately, "I hap-

pened to go into the J. C. Radio Store this afternoon, about that time." A wait. One of Walter's long, hellish waits. "Floto wasn't there. They said he was out in the car."

Another wait.

"I think you had better tell me, Connie."

How quietly, how casually he said it. Another person coming into the room at the moment and overhearing it would think it a chance remark.

"There isn't anything to tell, Walter," Connie heard herself say in a far-away, slightly hollow voice. "I don't know what you are making all this fuss about. I did make a mistake about old Mrs. Hooper. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry." She'd intended to go to see Mrs. Hooper, but ——

"It was a lie, then?"

"Y-yes."

"Why did you tell me a lie, Connie?"

Connie felt her mind beating wildly to seize upon some excuse, while Walter's hypnotic eyes seemed to grow larger. She could tell him that she happened to be out that way and had met Floto by chance; she would say that Walter, by his attitude, had made her afraid to tell the truth; she could blunder through it. Anyway, she could put it off a few days. Then Floto would be gone. The danger would be over. Never, never again would she tell Walter a lie. His confidence in her would return; the wound would heal.

But a calmer mentor told her that such subterfuge

would be impossible. Deceits! Lies! Lies! She was tired of them.

Suddenly a vast calmness came to her. She would tell Walter the truth, would explain that she had been carried away by the showy glamour of Greenwich Village and the dashing young scene painter. Walter would understand; he would forgive her. She would have her home, her children again. Blackmailer! Walter would scorn him.

"Listen, Walter," she began. "I'm going to tell you something. I know it's going to hurt, but I want you to understand just how it was, then you'll know better what happened today—about the billboard, I mean. I'll have to go back quite a ways to begin, Walter, even before I first met you. It was when I went to New York to study. It was a tremendously big thing for me, going there all alone, when I had barely been away from a small town. New York was wonderful, but, oh! it is so lonesome! I wish you could understand that, Walter," she appealed.

Connie drew quick, vivid pictures of New York, of its lonesomeness and its glamour walking hand in hand. Its romance and its cruelty; the long, lonesome days, the strange gibbering people who walk its streets, the heart-break nights. "And then I met Floto," she said, bravely.

Connie now could hardly stop. The years during which she had been trying to tell Walter were swept away and she wondered why she hadn't told him before. As Connie talked she felt the sweetness, the boundless relief of confession, as if something unclean

in her had suddenly been removed. She remembered this same feeling when, as a child, she had done something she shouldn't have done, and finally had told her mother. And now, as she confessed to Walter, she had the same sweet ecstasy of relief. Walter, on the other hand, sat watching her motionlessly.

She tried to make Walter see Floto as she had first seen him at the Pirates' Ball, the dashing young blade who knew everybody, who called the great by their first names, who singled her out for an introduction, who danced so well, who was going to become a famous scene painter and designer. She tried to make Walter feel all this as she sat before him, pulling at her handkerchief.

"I became acquainted with him and went to his studio. Then with his painter's frock on and with his velvet cap, he would make tea and we would dance ——"

The look in Walter's eyes seemed to soften. She had made him see herself in the maw of New York, made him feel the long days and lonesome nights. Now suddenly it was changed; the studios were open to her, invitations, gay friends, parties.

"This went on for quite a while," she continued, "and then one night after a party he asked me"—she managed to get the words out—"if I would come and m-move in with him. People didn't think much about it in Greenwich Village, he told me."

Now, with Walter before her, it seemed inexcusable; she felt a sudden revolting sense of shame. How could she ever have considered such a suggestion?

She had been shocked and horrified, she explained. "Then at the parties he began to point out people who were doing the same thing," she continued. "After a while it didn't seem so bad. Then one night"—Connie closed her eyes and suddenly her voice seemed far, far away—"I—I didn't go home."

Connie's heart went out to solemn, serious, noble Walter as he sat there. She knew how deeply it must strike him—Walter who had always looked up to her, honored her; and now she felt a deep, intense sense of shame. On the heels of this was a desire to do what she did when one of the twins came to her with his trouble. Walter was now no longer her husband, but her little son who had been hurt. She must bind up his wound. Suddenly she felt a deep yearning to throw her arms around his neck, and, rising, she got into his lap.

As her arms went around his neck a bitter thought rose before her: not much more than an hour ago she had sat on Floto's lap. In this very chair. *Ugh!* How could she have done such a thing?

But Walter's arms did not rise to welcome hers. His lips did not seek hers with the sweet, stirring sensation that Walter's kisses always aroused in her.

"Connie, you! I—I—but *you,*" he repeated in short, broken phrases, as he had once done when he had been ill and delirious and she had nursed him. "You, Connie! Me!"

His world was washed out from under him, the world he had cherished and built up. His eyes no longer came to strange, glistening points, but stared

wildly and openly. His lips were no longer pursed, but were thin and bloodless, while the hands, which had motionlessly gripped the arms of his chair, now began to open and shut feverishly.

"You remember the day that you made the speech at the Country Club?" continued Connie. "I came down to your office that afternoon to get you, and you were talking to Nettie, and so I picked up your Panama and went out to get a fresh band for it. I wanted you to look nice that night. That was when it happened, when I was out getting the hatband."

She told of the meeting with Floto, then of the threats that had followed. Her desperation. The money.

"I am so utterly, utterly miserable," she finished and her arms tightened about his neck. But there was no response.

Breathlessly watching every movement of Walter's, hoping for a contraction of his hand, she tried to make him see how bitterly she repented those days, and how foolish it was for a girl to sell herself so cheaply, while silently and half-expressed there ran through her mind the prayer, "O God! make him understand, make him understand!" Ordinarily Connie did not pray, but now, as she talked, the silent prayer beat through her mind. She paused.

"So you lived with him?"

The harsh words shocked her. They were true, it was what she had done, but somehow in thinking of the past she never used the words to herself.

"Y-yes. But that's all over, Walter, long, long

ago. I think—I suppose it sounds funny to say it—but I believe it makes me love you all the more." She meant that it gave her an appreciation of Walter's fine qualities, and now she would be able to face the world without constantly wondering if he knew. But Walter gave no answer; only continued silently to judge her.

As she talked she felt Walter soften. At first there had been the terrible, speechless shock, his amazement that Connie could do such a thing, the feeling of resentment that he had been taken in; but now as she pleaded with him she began to win him over. It would take time, it would be a slow process, but she would finally succeed; their little home would go on again. There would be a wound, a secret cicatrix, but in this stern world who escapes whole?

"You will forgive me, Walter, won't you?"

She saw him hesitate, saw the struggle going on in his mind.

There was a stir, a movement, and Mrs. Webb came slowly down the stairs and stood before them in her old, faded bathrobe, with a red cord tied about her waist. Her hair had been tied up by rags into curls which gave her the appearance of an aged, disheveled, white Topsy.

Connie got out of Walter's lap quickly. She had never been able, in Mrs. Webb's presence, to get over the feeling of guilt if Mrs. Webb found her and Walter in an embrace. The reason, although Connie did not know it, was that subconsciously Mrs. Webb resented such displays, as she felt that Connie was

stealing her son away from her and giving something that she could not give.

Mrs. Webb now did not have on her gold-rimmed glasses, and without them her eyes seemed even more staring, and she approached with the peering, short-sighted manner of a watery-eyed cocker Spaniel.

"So that's what's keeping you," she said in her faintly complaining manner. "I've been upstairs waiting and waiting. I never get to sleep till you two get to bed."

Going to the window, she drew down the blind.

"Somebody might pass and look in."

She turned to Connie. "You oughtn't to keep Walter up so late, especially as hard as he's working."

Mrs. Webb bent forward, her hand holding together the top of her bathrobe, while she regarded Walter with staring eyes.

"Walter, what's the matter? You look upset. What is it?"

Nothing was the matter, Walter said in a strange hollow voice; he would be up in a minute. But Mrs. Webb could not be put off. Yes, something was the matter.

She put her hand on his forehead. "Why, you're all upset," she announced, and her staring eyes turned accusingly to Connie. "And as hard as he works, too," she said.

Mrs. Webb fluttered over him, sighing faintly, while she gave a succession of quick *tck-tck-tck's* with her tongue. "Poor boy! poor boy!

"It's something about her New York friend, isn't

it?" she demanded, and as she said "her" she jerked her head toward Connie without looking in her direction. How well Connie knew the gesture, this talking to Walter without taking her into consideration. "Tell your mother, Wally; tell your mother."

It wasn't anything, Walter declared. He was just talking things over with Connie, that was all. It was time to go to bed.

Walter rose, as if to start upstairs.

Connie's heart suddenly went out to Walter, so loyal even in this moment when his world was torn asunder. But Connie knew that Mrs. Webb would not rest. A little here, a little there, her constant, relentless prying; sooner or later she would know all. . . . Connie shuddered at the thought.

"I'm going to tell all," Connie said to herself. Aloud: "Yes, mother"—how she hated the word!—"there is something wrong and I'm going to tell you what it is. It's about Floto. . . . You know already that I knew him in New York. Well, this is what you didn't know ——"

And mercilessly she told the story, as if it had been the experience of some one else . . . those early, forsaken days in New York, the first meeting, the advances, the midnight parties, while Mrs. Webb stood there, her dumpy figure outlined in the faded bathrobe, her mouth partly open, her eyes staring.

Once she moaned, "My son, my poor son!" and caught at Walter's hand.

But Mrs. Webb saw none of the pathos and tragedy of Floto's hounding of Connie, saw none of the terror

in which Connie had lived, caught none of the heartbreaks which for so long had been hers. Walter, her son, had been deceived. "Oh, the disgrace of it!" she broke in. Once her hand fished in the pocket of her bathrobe and she began to dab at her eyes with a wrinkled handkerchief. "And when Walter has always been such a *good* boy."

Later she said: "It's all the way mothers bring up their children." Mrs. Webb had never thought that Connie had been reared rightly. No one was quite the perfect mother except herself.

A moment later she moaned: "What'll people say? What'll people say? It's bound to get out. Such things always do."

"It's all over now," Connie continued, "and I want to start in again. No one could be sorrier than I am, but we can't go back in life. We've always got to go forward."

"Starting over w-won't do any good," sobbed Mrs. Webb. "Now my head's started to ache."

As Connie continued her story she saw that Walter was moved by her appeal. But not Mrs. Webb. A great and terrible wrong had been done her son, and as Connie went along she saw that Mrs. Webb was influencing Walter. It was now a fight between the two women for Walter. Unconsciously Walter looked from one to the other.

"Why, Walter," broke in his mother, "she's nothing but a fallen woman!"

Connie heard the words fully—fallen woman; she saw Mrs. Webb, now with tears glistening in her eyes,

hovering over Walter, stroking his hair, moaning. In her excitement Mrs. Webb had forgotten to keep her bathrobe together at the top, and now under the gaping plain white nightgown the withered slope of her breasts showed.

"Walter," his mother sobbed as she dashed at her streaming eyes, "you can't let her stay in our home to grow up with the children. Oh, those poor, innocent darlings!"

She dabbed again at her eyes, while her voice rose higher. "Look at what they did in Hawthorne's day —they put a scarlet letter on such people so everybody would know." The absurd sentiment came from the motion picture of the novel, *The Scarlet Letter,* which Mrs. Webb had seen, and now she began to babble about it. "And she expects to go right on living in this home as if she hadn't ruined it."

Mrs. Webb paused, her mouth opened slightly as it did when she went through the painful operation of thinking.

"I met Floto this evening when I was coming home, coming from this direction." She turned full upon Connie. "Connie, did you have that man here this evening?"

Connie had confessed everything to Walter except that Floto had been in the house. It had not seemed necessary to tell him, and also there was the revolting memory that only a short time before she had sat on his lap, as later she had sat on Walter's.

Mrs. Webb saw Connie hesitate, saw the slight, involuntary restlessness of her fingers.

"See! he was," she declared, her voice for a moment suddenly shrill. "He was probably kissing her tonight, with those innocent babies asleep upstairs!" *Dab-dab.* "You see, she won't answer. Constance, was he here or not? Walter and I have a right to know. Haven't we, Walter?" she appealed.

"Yes, he was," returned Connie, defiantly, while she saw Walter turn his shocked eyes upon her afresh.

"Why didn't you tell me that, Connie?" he asked.

Connie tried to explain the plan she had been driven to in her desperation—how she was to meet him in Los Angeles, in the motion-picture world—but now as she told it, with Mrs. Webb picking her up on every point, the plan seemed ridiculous.

"Walter," broke in Mrs. Webb, "you remember the night of your birthday dinner, when he played that terrible musical saw? Well, that night I thought I saw him kiss Connie, but I put it out of my mind and just wouldn't let myself think of it. But now—maybe she *invited* him here, for all we know. Oh, my head! I don't think there's any asperin in the house, either. You used it all, didn't you, Constance?"

How well Connie knew this trick of Mrs. Webb's of making a ruthless assertion and then suddenly turning to something else, as if it had been of no consequence. If the statement passed without challenge, she would return to it later and parade it as if it were an established fact. Also, Connie had used the last of the asperin and had mentioned it at the dinner table before Walter, and said that she would get more.

"Of course it's too late to get anything at the drug

store now," continued Mrs. Webb. "I don't suppose I'll get a wink of sleep tonight."

Connie turned to Mrs. Webb furiously . . . she had not invited Floto to the house and it was unfair and unjust to say such a thing, she declared. But it had no effect on Mrs. Webb.

"Well, maybe I was wrong," she said, returning to her faint, complaining voice. "It just seemed that way, that was all."

Connie tried to make Walter look at it reasonably, tried to make him see that she was not wholly to blame, but she was not only fighting the Plymouth Rock in Walter, but his mother's influence as well—a deep, determining influence which went back to days unremembered. Connie tried to make him see that womankind was not divided into classes of fallen and not fallen. But the belief had grown in him and was deep as his nature.

Never had Connie known that she could so humiliate herself. As she pleaded for herself, Mrs. Webb stood there silently, a half smile on her face, from time to time turning her eyes confidently to Walter.

"Don't you see I'm not bad?" Connie cried, in desperation.

"I suppose Nettie wasn't, either," Mrs. Webb sniffed. Indeed, it was worse, she declared, for Connie had actually *lived* with Floto, while poor Nettie—well, it had happened only a few times. Besides, Nettie didn't have any children.

As they talked, Walter no longer looked at Connie, but sat with brows creased, as if trying to peer through

some mist which had enveloped him. His hands gripped the arms of the chair as though trying to hold fast to something secure in a world that was falling to pieces about him.

"When you accepted me," he said, a harsh note rising in his voice, "you demanded love, faith, and sound principles. Was I asking too much that in return you should be clean and unsoiled? When a man buys a lot, or a farm, he demands that the title be clean. If it turns out to be faulty, then he can go to law. All contracts end. It seems to me that it's the same thing with a wife—if the title's bad, then the deal's off. Why, you're simply a cheat, that's all."

Connie heard the words—the title faulty, go to law, a cheat. . . . It was the way he would reason, comparing her to a title to land, and she knew that he would continue to see it in that way. And he had called her a cheat! Connie sat still, a growing sense of the consequences rising before her.

"Walter's right," declared Mrs. Webb. "She did cheat you. You'll have to be divorced, Walter. We'll have the children and we'll raise them right."

Connie had the sense of fainting, and yet she knew she was not fainting. That creature take her precious, darling boys! No, never, never!

Abruptly her conciliatory spirit was gone. She was no longer defending herself; there was now something bigger and more important than herself.

Until now Connie had been holding herself in, trying to be calm, but that was all gone. She no longer

wanted to be reasonable, even sane. She whirled upon Mrs. Webb.

"Yes, I lied to him; of course I did; but it was because I loved him. If I hadn't cared for him, I would have told him everything and cried a little and got him to say he would forgive me, but I wouldn't tell him because our love was too sacred." She turned to Walter, her hands gripped in her intensity. "Don't you see," she cried, "that I lied to you because I was afraid of losing you? Don't you? Don't you?" she appealed. "It had happened before we met, before I knew what love was. I just couldn't tell you, Walter."

"Don't let her work on you, Walter," broke in Mrs. Webb. "She's just trying to get herself out of it."

Suddenly Connie turned upon her mother-in-law.

"You go upstairs!" she cried in a voice that amazed even herself. "This is between Walter and me. Get in your room and shut the door."

Mrs. Webb turned to Walter. Was he going to let Connie talk to her that way? To his own mother?

"Think of her talking to me that way," choked Mrs. Webb, "after all I have done for her!"

Mrs. Webb stood a moment, her hands shaking, her fingers working. "No, I'm not going up," she declared in her whining voice. "My place is with my son. Isn't it, Walter?"

"You *are* going up," declared Connie. "Now."

The two faced each other.

"Walter ——" Mrs. Webb appealed.

Connie's eyes fastened on the glass cage with its stuffed prisoners, and suddenly a great hate rose up in her for them and for all they represented. And the hate which had been storing up in her for so long now broke out in a tremendous wave. Abruptly she picked up the glass cage and hurled it to the floor, where it exploded with a terrific crash.

Mrs. Webb stood staring at the wreck and the corona of glass. One of the aged birds was now in the corner, apparently trying to stand on its head, while the other had rolled toward Connie.

"My poor, darling birdies!" cried Mrs. Webb, her voice suddenly high.

Darling birdies! The expression was too much for Connie.

"Your damned old stuffed dust-catchers!" shouted Connie. "That's what they are, and you know it."

Connie was amazed at herself. Swearing! She who never stooped to such cheap release. Shouting at the top of her voice! Connie remembered the same feeling which she had had when she was a child and had "let herself go." And now she knew she was doing it again, and she enjoyed it.

One of the birds, in its impact with the corner, had bounced back toward her and now lay gaping before her.

"That's what I think of the damned things," she repeated, and kicked the innocent creature across the floor.

Mrs. Webb stood stupefied at the amazing barbarity.

Swearing! Calling them damned old stuffed dust-catchers!

Mrs. Webb turned to Walter.

"Did you see that?" she demanded, little moans and cries now coming from her throat, while for once her eyes batted quickly.

"Of course he saw it and you saw it and I saw it," shouted Connie, "and you're going to see some more, too, if you don't go."

Mrs. Webb stood hesitating a moment, then made a gesture toward Walter.

"You heard me," declared Connie in the same high voice. "Go."

Mrs. Webb turned toward the stairs. There was a flash of white as her bare heels showed, then the *clap-clap* of her slippers on the stairway.

At the top of the stairs she paused.

"I just know I'm going to have my sick headache," she whined.

Then the door shut. Connie turned directly to Walter and her eyes sought his.

"I didn't want to treat your mother that way," she said, "but I had to. Listen, Walter. I don't care what you believe of me now—I guess you couldn't believe worse—but I'm going to tell you just what I think." Connie's mind and body seemed charged with the new, vibrant, fighting spirit which had taken possession of her.

"What your mother says is all true, every word of it. I have deceived you, but"—and suddenly her voice softened—"can't you see it is all over now? I made

a mistake. I used to think as you do, that once a girl made a mistake she was irretrievably lost, but that's all rot, and I want you to know it. That's the old Puritan streak in America, the Plymouth Rock part of this country. It burned witches, it's the New England father who puts his daughter out of his home."

But Walter only shook his head.

"You deceived me," he repeated, dully.

Connie saw the disillusioned, honest Walter as he walked up and down the floor, his brows furrowed, and she felt immensely sorry for him. It had bitten into his idealistic soul. She tried to make him understand the position that she was in, tried to make him understand the agony she had gone through, the disgusting advances Floto had made, the kisses he had demanded. She tried to make him feel the terror she was in, the growing fear. Walter caught glimpses of it, but they were only glimpses. He could see it only from his point of view—his wife had deceived him. If she hadn't made this first misstep, the others would not have followed.

Connie saw him sitting across from her, his lips drawn into straight thin lines, silently weighing her.

"I'd like to take you back, Connie," he said, "but" —he paused, there was a moment's silence, then thickly he finished—"I can't Connie, I just can't. I just couldn't bear to see you around. I want the divorce."

Connie heard the terrible words. Her twins, her home!

Connie saw that she was not fighting Walter, but the Plymouth Rock part of his nature. It is a part

of many men in America, this narrow, unforgiving, relentless streak in their natures. A stone wall.

She knew he would never complain. His mother would continue to influence him; he would get a divorce; after a time he would remarry. It was now late. In a few minutes they must go upstairs. But Walter would not go to their room. On the same floor was her sewing room, fitted out with a couch; sometimes, when one of the twins was restless, she would take him into Walter's bed and Walter would go to the couch in the sewing room for the rest of the night. Tonight he would probably go there; separate rooms would begin; soon they would be strangers. After a time the divorce.

"You're not going to drive me out this way, Walter," she declared. He could put her out of the house, if he wanted to, but she was going to stay right here in Junction City. She paused, her heart beating heavily.

"Walter, I hate to say it, but you made Nettie leap. You killed her, you and the attitude you took toward her!"

Walter was stunned.

"Stop! Don't say that. I was only doing what was right. If she wanted to jump, it was her own affair." And again Connie saw that hard, uncompromising, Puritanical streak.

"You mean, you did what you *thought* was right. Well, it wasn't right. That was all. Nettie would be alive today if you hadn't taken the attitude you did. Well, that's the way girls used to do, but no Lovers'

Leap for me. I'm going to live and I'm going to live right here in Junction City. Your mother is causing a lot of this and she's got to get out," declared Connie.

Occasionally Mrs. Webb had talked vaguely about going to California to see her brother, Uncle George, as he was called, and Connie had hoped she would go; but nothing had ever come of it, and now as she said, "Your mother's got to get out," she had this in mind.

But at the words Walter looked at her in astonishment. His mother get out! Why, she was a wonderful mother!

"That's what's the matter with her—she still wants you to be her little boy," declared Connie.

Walter sat stunned, his world tumbling about him. Connie unfaithful, his mother attacked! The harsh accusation Connie had made in regard to Nettie! But the deception of his wife—that was the unforgivable thing.

Once Walter said: "If only you hadn't deceived me, afterward. If you had only told me before we were married. To think that after all these years I believed in you so implicitly, you were not worthy of it. That's what hurts."

Connie knew that she should have told, she said—all women should. She saw how foolish it was for a woman to try to cover up her past. How much better it is for a husband and wife to start in with the slate clean. The washing is hard, but the longer it goes the worse it gets. If Floto had not come to Junction City she would never have had to tell her

husband; Walter would have known nothing about it, her home would not have been broken up, but there was that *if* ——

Connie continued to talk, but Walter only sat looking at her, calmly judging her. Which would win out —Connie or Plymouth Rock? And even if she won, there was still Floto. What would he do? She could not now pretend that she would meet him in Hollywood. He would tell, of course. She caught a glimpse of him at the radio store and at the pool halls, dropping just enough hints. Avis Templeton would hear . . . the prairie fire would be running before the wind.

Walter's eyes had now left Connie and stared at the floor. He moved, and in his voice, as he spoke, was a great weariness.

"And after I told Tom Uzzell they couldn't turn up anything on me!" he said, and a slight, hope-departed moan escaped him.

It was time to go to bed. Walter rose and stood for a moment looking at Connie, as if making a final decision, and Connie felt her heart bound. Now he would turn to her and she would be forgiven. But the old lines and furrows in his brain were too deep and fixed. He stood weighing her a moment, and then slowly, heavily, wearily he turned and started up the stairs, alone. A moment later she heard him go into the little sewing room.

The door closed.

Chapter Twelve

BY THE next morning Mrs. Webb had had time to think it over. Constance's conduct had been terrible; it would ruin Walter's life and would blacken the name of the poor, innocent children, but there must not be a divorce, as she had at first thought. Divorce! Think what people would say! Never had there been a divorce in the Webb family.

Abruptly, as a trickle of tears washed her face, Mrs. Webb threw her arms around the children. "Oh, you poor innocent darlings!" she cried.

"What's the matter, gran'ma?" asked Albert, lifting his mouth from the tumbler and giving the slight, breathless gulp which always followed his attack on a glass of milk.

Nothing was the matter, Mrs. Webb explained as she made a dab at the tears with the back of her hand. Hush, and eat slowly and not ask so many questions. Their mother wasn't feeling well and it had given papa a headache.

Which, of course, started their trigger tongues. Why didn't mamma feel well? What was the matter? And why did papa have a nold headache?

Naturally now, Mrs. Webb said, after the twins had gone to their apple tree in the back yard, the news would get out. The town would talk. As soon

as Floto found out that he wasn't going to get the money from Connie, he would start his tongue going, and then —— Mrs. Webb shook her head and gave a long, deep sigh. It would be best, she said, as the three of them sat at the breakfast table, for Connie to go away a while, until things quieted down. It'd be easier and would take less explaining. She would say that Connie had been called to Kansas City by the illness of her mother. After the worst had blown over Connie could come back.

"But, of course," Mrs. Webb sighed, "the worst will really be after a while, when the twins are older and begin to ask questions. The poor darlings!" Another sigh. "Don't you think so, Walter?" she asked, turning to Walter.

The wedge had entered.

Usually of a morning it was Connie's task to take the twins out for a brief walk, while Mrs. Webb washed the breakfast dishes. But now, as Mrs. Webb sat at the table in the mussy old dressing-gown which she always wore to breakfast, she turned to Walter with an eagerness which she could not hide. Didn't Walter think it would be best for Connie, upset as she was, not to take the children out this morning? Children were always so sensitive to the condition people were in. Connie could do the dishes and begin the upstairs work, while she took the children out for their walk.

"Yes, I think you'd better," said Walter.

"Walter, don't you want another cup of coffee?" she asked. "I know *I* do. I didn't sleep hardly a

wink for thinking about you and the children, poor darlings. Oh, how my heart goes out to them!" She hovered over Walter, pouring the coffee. Then she turned to Connie. "How about you?"

She arose from the table; there was the soft *clap-clap* of her slippers on the floor as she put the coffee-pot on the stove. "I'm going to keep it warm. I expect I'll need some during the morning. Walter, you ought to run out and get some before noon." Now she was sitting in her place at the table again, swirling the coffee around in her cup. "Anyway, I had Floto sized up right from the beginning. How she could plead romance for such a creature as him I don't know," she declared, and at the word "she" made a slight gesture toward Connie. "Romance! It wasn't romance at all. It was just"—she lifted the cup to her lips and drank with slight contractions of her throat—"well, I don't know what. And think of you all that time staying right here in Junction City and being faithful to a future wife!" Again the tears oozed from her eyes and again she dabbed at them with the back of her hand. "Of course, lots of husbands would take their children away from her altogether. But, of course, we won't ask that." The rattle of her spoon; swallow, gulp. "And my poor birdies! Throwing them on the floor. The poor birdies your dear father gave me. I don't know how she could do it when she knew how much they meant to us."

Connie saw that Walter was haggard, with the drawn look in his eyes that always followed a restless night. She had heard him in the bathroom, splashing

in the tub, but there was not the singing which Walter was addicted to. And he had not come out of the bathroom with the cheerful morning greetings which he always had for the rest of the family. Except for slight stirrings, the bathroom was a tomb.

With a night to sleep on it, Walter no longer thought that divorce was the solution. And now with his mind suspended in the balance, he was being influenced. Walter, Connie knew, would never make a scene. He would not throw her deception up to her every time he was in a bad mood; he would not keep it constantly dangling over her head and use it as a weapon to beat her into submission. To him it would be deeper and more cankerous; it would hurt him more deeply and would crush the feeling he had for her more completely than if he gave way to such easy escape. They would continue to live together, but they would not be happy. It would be merely existing. They would mean but little more to each other than strangers meeting under the roof of the same hotel. The finest in life for her and Walter would be gone. Walter would be good to the children, he would try to give them every advantage, but he could not hold up their mother to them as a guide. And more and more Mrs. Webb would get control of them. Soon Connie would not be Walter's wife, but his housekeeper.

Walter sat brooding at the table, eating mechanically —Walter who was usually so cheerful and agreeable. Husbands, Connie had always heard, were not the best company at the breakfast table, but for Walter

there never had been any eleven-o'clock day, when many husbands come out of the night's torpor. Connie knew that he was thinking about Floto. *What would Floto do?* That was the question. This was the day that Connie was to give him the money, and then in a day or two he was to start for Los Angeles.

Walter's nature had revolted at the idea of buying him off. A blackmailer! No, never. And Connie, too, on more sober reflection, saw that it would be useless to seek such easy escape. Even though they gave him the money to get to Los Angeles, he would soon demand more. If they refused to send him the money, the word would get back. Then the sensation.

"No, we can't do that," Walter said as they discussed it.

Tears again popped into Mrs. Webb's eyes. "You poor boy!" she said as she patted his hand. "I know what I'll do," declared Mrs. Webb. "I'll go to Floto, tell him that I am old enough to be his mother, shame him, and get him to leave town."

Mrs. Webb beamed at this brilliant idea. "And I'll give him a piece of my mind, too," she added. "The idea of him trying to break up my son's home."

They finally quieted her.

If they didn't give Floto the money, what would he do? What would he say? The word would get around; gossip . . . Walter's career.

"I'll go and see Floto and have a talk with him," said Walter, slowly. "I'll tell him if he says a word ——" Walter's lips came together.

A few times before, Connie had seen this tense thin-

ning of his lips, the cold glitter that came into Walter's eyes, the green pallor which seemed to come over his face, when his anger was thoroughly aroused.

In her imagination she could see the scene at the store. Walter would walk in quietly, ominously. There would be insolence on Floto's part, words would fly, the men would grapple. A fight! The word would fly up and down the street, men would rush in . . . then the scandal. Walter and the sign-painter fighting! What a rich morsel that would be! How Avis would fatten on it. But it might even be worse than that. Walter might kill Floto. She dared not think of it.

She would go to see Floto herself. She would appeal to his manhood and try to get him, as soon as he could arrange it, quietly to leave Junction City. If he told, or so much as intimated, then he would have to deal with Walter. She would make him understand the desperate situation he was in, but she must not give him the money. Connie felt a trembling within herself as she thought of facing Floto. Could she carry it off?

That afternoon Connie started downtown on her way to see Floto. She had called by telephone, and he was in the store. "I'm getting things straightened around," he said, and she understood that he was making his final arrangements to start to California. And now she must tell him that she could not give him the money.

Junction City had never seemed lovelier, as she walked down its leafy, whispering streets, than it did

now. It was the afternoon of a livestock sale at the pavilion, where cows and pigs and sheep were auctioned off, and now she could see the men, mostly farmers, slowly moving eastward across the Square toward the little wooden pavilion. The peanut-and-popcorn-wagon man was just coming up with his white wagon, leading his horse. He would unhitch the horse, tie him on the other side of the Square, take off the shafts, fold them under the wagon, and start the shrill, tantalizing whistle going. As Connie continued down the street, people smiled at her and went out of their way to speak to her, and farmers, whom Walter had helped, respectfully lifted their hats as she passed. Homely, friendly scences they were. Connie had known them all her life, and now suddenly her heart was wrenched. What would happen now? Would this little comfortable town, which esteemed her so highly, turn against her with its bitter gossip? Would it come down on Walter? His career? Even if they continued to live there, would the stigma always rest on them? The children?

As she turned into the street near the J. C. Radio Store, she could hear the amplifying horn going full blast. Some misguided person was singing a comic song, and if there was anything that depressed her it was such a song blared in such a way.

A very frightened, very determined, but outwardly calm Connie walked into the store. A clerk came toward her.

"Howdy-do, Mrs. Webb?" he greeted. "Nice afternoon, isn't it?" He waited a moment respectfully,

for in Junction City it was not considered quite good etiquette so soon to urge a person to buy. "Is there something I can do for you?" he asked after a moment.

Connie's quick eyes had flashed over the store, and she felt thankful. Mr. Givens, with his big ears, was not there.

"Yes," she returned, pleasantly. "I'd like to see Mr. Floto a moment."

"He's back there, in the private office," said the clerk, indicating the rear of the store.

"The private office" was merely a partitioned-off room, with the walls going up only part way to the ceiling, but it served to shut off the rear of the store from the rest. Here it was that Floto did what he called his "paper work"—sent out his orders, saw the traveling salesmen, and kept his books.

As she came closer she heard voices inside. At first she did not pay much attention to them; it was probably some one talking over buying a new radio set. But as she waited, steeling herself for the interview, a familiar intonation lingered in her ears. "Who is that?" she thought to herself. It was a woman's voice. The voice was tantalizingly familiar, but in it was a note that she had never before heard, a deep, frightened, almost crying earnestness. And then as she listened she knew that it was Yansca Polin's.

Yansca Polin. But why should she be in there? At this time of day? Closeted with Floto?

Connie caught broken sentences and isolated words, and the strange half-sob in Yansca's voice. And then,

as she listened, Connie felt a sudden weakness. Yansca had been to the doctor. Yansca was "in trouble."

She heard Yansca's tense, frightened voice:

"The doctor says he can't do anything about it—says it's too dangerous. But I *must* do something."

Connie saw the tragedy of it—Yansca with her bright promise and her high ambition, and now this sudden hopeless pit.

"But, Eddie, I *must* do something," she repeated. "I could go to Kansas City. Maybe some doctor there could——" Her voice trailed off.

Eddie! It was what Floto had tried in Greenwich Village to teach her to call him. If he were allowed to go on, there would be a succession of girls in his life calling him Eddie. But while one was still calling him Eddie, some other girl would have caught his roving attention. Suddenly now Connie saw him for what he was—weak, shifty, dangerous.

Floto's voice: "This is a hell of a mess. I told you to see about it before. You oughtn't to waited. Now look what's happened!"

Connie could imagine the scene: dainty, pretty, big-eyed, stunned Yansca sitting on her chair in the little littered office, pulling her handkerchief through her fingers, but not crying—not quite. Connie thought of Yansca's father and mother and the members of the little German-Polish settlement on the other side of the county, who felt so proud of their Yansca. Connie recalled the day when the picturesque members of that community had brought Yansca to the college and had proudly watched her walk up the stone steps and

enter what, to them, must have seemed a tremendously big and awe-inspiring building. There had been tears in her mother's eyes, and it must have seemed to her that Yansca was going away forever. The members of the little settlement had stood talking in their queer German-Polish dialect, there had been some kind of sign of farewell, and then they had turned and walked slowly off together. They would miss their Yansca, the belle of the neighborhood, their pet. Now and then, on their holidays, they had sent Yansca queer dishes and dainties, and over her bed in the dormitory was a queer, Old World crazy-quilt which Yansca was very proud of. Once, in honor of Yansca's coming home for some feast day, they had come in their costumes and given a dance on the lawn in front of the college. The musicians had played spiritedly, with smiles on their faces, nodding their heads and patting their great feet while Yansca and a few of her friends from the settlement danced. The ovation had been tremendous. And then the musicians had picked up their instruments, and the dancers and the fathers and mothers had gone smilingly and happily across the yard to their cars. They had been asked to repeat the performance, and had promised to do so when the feast day came around again. And now Yansca, their favorite, must return to them. . . .

"I don't know what you are going to do." It was Floto's harsh voice again. "You ought to have watched better. Kansas City is better, I guess. I'll try to get the money. But for Heaven's sake don't go bawling around and give it away."

With a heart stirred by the scene taking place in the littered office, Connie walked to the front of the store. She did not wish to make it necessary for Yansca, stirred by the dawning tragedy, to have to meet her when she came out.

"He's got some one in with him," she told the clerk. "I've got to go into another store, anyway, so I'll go and come back."

"Certainly, Mrs. Webb."

For some minutes Connie walked up and down the street, and then went back. But Yansca had not gone. The door opened, there was the squeak of Floto's voice, and Yansca came out. As she saw Mrs. Webb, who had helped her get the scholarship and who had been so kind, and who to her seemed such a great person, she paused, embarrassed. But she carried it out bravely.

"Howdy-do, Mrs. Webb?" she said, her slim fingers moving nervously. "I—I didn't expect to find you here. I just dropped in a moment." She looked around desperately for a moment. It was nice weather, she said. Yes, very nice, indeed. But Connie knew how Yansca's mind must be whirling, as her own had been after she had met Floto on the street that day when she had gone to buy the colored hatband. And yet Yansca must appear casual. Her frightened eyes swept the store, while she tried to smile. Radio was wonderful, wasn't it? Sometimes she just couldn't believe it.

Intensely Connie wanted to walk down the street with her and get Yansca to confide in her. She might

be able to do so later, but not now. She must see Floto, first.

Yansca was now at the door.

"Good day, Mrs. Webb. I—I must go."

Yansca smiled as she closed the door, and then started down the street with an air of bright casualness that touched Connie to the heart.

Now Connie must go in and face him.

Connie had the feeling of standing in the door of a very small and very cramped room. Packing-cases were half open, radio parts were strewn about, there was a nest of excelsior on the floor, and on the walls were pictures of racehorses cut from the newspapers and of jockeys in their costumes. Floto was sitting at his desk in a swivel chair, with his hat pushed back on his head. How well she remembered from the days in Greenwich Village this habit of wearing his hat in the house, and now, sitting at his littered desk, his hat on his head, he looked up as she appeared in the door.

"Hullo, Con!" he greeted her, and with his hand gave the door a push; but it dragged on the floor and did not quite close. "Well, it's good to see you," he declared, giving it another push.

Now they were alone. The time had come.

"By golly! you do look good," he declared, once more the beau gallant, and made a gesture to kiss her.

A revulsion passed over her at the thought. No, she must not let him do that, and gave a signal of warning to indicate the clerk in the front of the store. Floto looked at her in surprise.

Well, girls were queer; one day, Yes; the next day,

No. Anyway—and his eyes moved over her again—she did look cool and comfortable.

Floto still preserved something of his jaunty appearance, even in his littered office, something of the gay manner and the dashing air which had appealed to her in New York. But now she could see beneath it, and could read the essential cheapness that had always been there. And now as she looked at him, knowing him as she now did, she was amazed that he could have ever appealed to her.

"Sit down," he said, with a wave at the chair.

In a moment she was in the seat that Yansca had just vacated.

Connie had expected to see Floto flustered after the interview with Yansca, but there was no indication of it. He had been rushing around like a chicken with its head off, trying to get ready for—— His voice lowered and he jerked his head to indicate California. He'd got things pretty well shaped up; in a couple of days he would hit the trail.

He paused.

"You got it, ain't you?"

"No."

He leaned forward in unbelief.

"How do you mean, Con?"

Connie felt a strange fluttering in her heart. Now she must tell him.

"I mean I haven't got it and I'm not going to get it," she said, bravely.

Floto sat for a moment without moving, and then his mouth opened; his eyes seemed to stare slightly.

"You're just kidding, ain't you?"

Connie shook her head. "I'm not going to give you a cent," she declared.

"You mean not atall?"

"That's just what I mean."

His lip went up in the slight animal snarl which was sometimes his.

Oh, she wasn't, wasn't she? Well, she had been playing that tomorrow game long enough. She'd been stringing him along for weeks, and now what does she do? Comes calmly in and says she ain't going to do it at all, that's what she does. Well, he'd just see about that.

His hand reached out for the telephone.

"Hullo! Give me the County Recorder's office, please."

Floto's bright, glistening eyes rested on her, but Connie did not move. There was a tinkle at the other end of the wire.

"Put Mr. Webb on, please."

Connie raised her hand. "I think you had best be careful," she said, quietly. "You might get more than you want. Walter knows all about it. I told him everything, the night you came out and threatened me."

Threatened her! Never before had she dared be so bold with him.

"You told me once before that you'd told him."

"He knows all of it now," replied Connie in a voice so calm that it surprised her. "Call him if you like,

and when you're through I'd like to tell him about you and Yansca."

Yansca! Floto paused, hesitated, then slowly the receiver went back to its hook.

"What do you know about me—her?" He jerked his head at the telephone. "I'll talk to him later," he declared.

"When I came in, Yansca was here. I overheard what she said. I heard her tell about the doctor."

"I don't see that's any business of yours," he said in his harsh, slightly nasal voice.

No concern of hers! No concern that he should ruin the life of so beautiful and promising a girl! Connie's tongue was freed. As she talked she saw Floto looking at her steadily, at first belligerently, then bit by bit his aggressive, antagonistic manner began to slip away.

"It's very much my business," she finished. "And I'm going to continue to make it my business. There's no name too low for you."

"Listen, Connie. I know it's a muss, and I'm awfully sorry, but jawing won't help matters any. You loan me the money and I'll get out to Los Angeles, and I'll get at once."

That was like him, Connie declared with feeling. Go and leave Yansca to look out for herself. "No, indeed," she finished, "not on my money. I'm not going to give you a cent."

Yes, it was true that he had got Yansca into a fix, but it'd been her fault. But it wasn't too late yet; that could be fixed. "Listen, Connie," he appealed

again. "Don't you see I'm up against it? I—I've got to have that money." Old-man Givens was a scoundrel. The store hadn't made the rent, let alone a profit; cleaned him out of every red cent, it had. But if he had five hundred dollars ——

"Don't you see, Con," he declared, eagerly leaning toward her, "if I don't get that money I've got to go to spreading paint again." He hated those damned billboards.

"Why, Con, I was meant for big things." His eyes flashed, his braggadocio manner came back. "In art school there wasn't anyone in my class. I walked off and left the whole bunch, and now look at me!"

He continued to appeal to her. He wanted to get some place in the world. He'd had a lot of bad luck, but if he could just get to Hollywood once, then he could start all over again.

"I'll send you the money back, Con, and I'll marry Yansca, if she'll have me. Yes, I will," he declared. "I'll get her folks to come across with some dough, and I'll take her out to Hollywood, and after she's had her kid I'll get a job for her in the studios. Why, she ought to go over with a bang, specially with me back of her. Honestly, I'm awfully sorry about Yansca, but I'll pull her out yet. You know I can, Con. I've got it in me, you know that. Look at how I stood in art school; had it on everybody in the class," he repeated.

His leg was now swinging, as he sat on the edge of the desk, while he bent forward in his most persuasive

manner. Now and then there was a glint of his gold teeth.

"I know it's a shame about Yansca, poor kid. Of course, it can be stopped yet. It's done every day, you know that. But if she ain't in favor of going through with it, I'll marry her. Yes, I will," he declared. "She thinks a lot of me, Yannie does. I'll bet I could put her over in Hollywood, too. Con, don't you see I can do it?—if you'll just dig up that money for me. I'll never breathe a word about you, Con, not a syllable. Lots of fellas would, but not me. I'm not that kind. If you didn't already have a husband, I'd ask you to marry me."

His hand swept out in a magnanimous gesture.

"Look at how well I got along in G. V. when I had you behind me to give me a little encouragement. A man needs a good woman behind him, it don't make any difference how good the man is. But," he sighed, brushing the ashes with his little finger onto the floor, "of course that can't be now. You've got two as lovely kids as I ever saw. I wish now I'd settled down and had some of my own. They make life worth while, kids do. That's the reason I want Yannie to take me, if she will. Listen. I'll tell you what I wish you'd do for me. You have a talk with Yannie and fix it up. I'll marry her before I leave Junction City, and take her with me. You tell her that. She's a little sore on me now, naturally, but that'll pass. Why," he enthused, now tapping Connie on the arm, "I'll bet that in five years Yannie and I would be the leading scene-

painters in Hollywood! Look at the points I could give her, criticizing her work and so on."

As he continued to talk, swept on by his words, Connie felt a moment's pity for him.

Was he this futile, hopeless, self-illusioned man through some shortcoming of his own? If conditions had been different, might he have risen and become a person of character and consequence; or was he born with a shallow mind and a dwarfed soul and would he go through life to the end just as he was now? As she looked at him sitting there, trying to wheedle her into doing what he wanted, going over and over what a promising person he had been in art school, she suddenly saw it in larger scope. It was not merely Floto, but mankind, mankind on the way up from the mire. Are we all born with certain restrictions, and no matter how we struggle are we caught in their net which yields but never breaks? Are our restrictions, our limitations, our weaknesses as firmly saddled on us as the shell on a turtle's back? Had a few brain cells taken a different form, what a splendid person he might have been! she thought. A great painter, a fine, worthy man—who knows? But the turtle's shell was on his back. It would always be there.

"You'll give me the money, won't you, Con?" he finished.

"No, I won't," she repeated, positively. "Not a penny."

He sat staring at her.

"You don't mean it, Con."

"I mean every word of it."

His voice now had almost a whine in it. She wouldn't do that, would she?

"Con, I know you've got it in for me, but I always meant right by you. If you'd let me have that money when I first wanted it, probably I'd had enough now to pull me out of this hole. Look at the money I've made in the past on the ponies. Lots of it. And when I had my big chance you wouldn't help me or give me a lift.

Connie rose.

"You ain't goin' to leave me, walk right out, are you?" he demanded, his voice now sharp. "Well, all right, go then. I might have known you'd do it if you had the chance. Well, I'll go, too. I'm going over to the courthouse and see Walter, that's what I am going to do."

But Connie was now walking down the store. His sharp voice followed her.

"You think I won't but you'll see," he whined.

"Good day, Mrs. Webb. Call again," said the clerk, respectfully.

The door closed. Connie started down the street.

Bit by bit it got around town, as such things will, that Yansca was "in trouble." Her roommates at the dormitory began to see that she was not the bright, laughing, gay Yansca they had known. Now suddenly and mysteriously she was depressed and morose. They found her in tears for no reason at all. The dean of women came to see her. Something was wrong. Wouldn't Yansca tell her what it was? Yansca did not tell, but the dean suspected.

Also Floto, once with her so constantly, no longer walked down the street with her, with his hand on her arm, laughing and talking in the gay way he had when in the presence of girls. They now passed on the street without speaking.

The rumor grew. Something ought to be done, the town said, and of course did nothing. It was a rotten shame, Floto getting a young country girl like that into a mess. Yes, something ought to be done. But nothing was; nothing happened. Floto continued to walk the street with the slight swagger which he managed to impart when he appeared in public.

Groups of two or three men met and talked things over. He ought to be made to leave town. But nothing came of it. Why, in lots of towns, they said, he'd get his walking papers so quick he wouldn't know what was happening. But it went no farther than talk.

Yansca went home to her parents, with a pretense that all was well, but parents are parents, and especially mothers are mothers. Usually when Yansca came home for a week end or a holiday, she was light and happy. She was outdoor with her brothers; she liked the stock and would go to the barn lots and play with the calves and pigs. Or sometimes, in another mood, she would run for her sketch pad, and there would be Mudie, the calf, living and breathing on paper. But now Yansca did not run to be with her brothers, she did not go to the calf lot.

The word spread among the members of the community. Their Yansca, the Yansca they had taken so

much pride in. They came to see her, dropped in by ones and twos, but they did not say much. Some things are not easy to talk about.

They sat smoking and deliberating in their slow, methodical way. Now and then little groups, out of sight of Yansca, got together and talked. Yansca was in trouble. That was all they wanted to know. The man. Who was he?

After Floto had first met Yansca he had come out to see her and had spent the evening with her, but her parents did not like him with his smart ways and supercilious manner. He had tried to be his bright, entertaining self, had asked for a saw and had sent up its wailings. Her parents and brothers, with their great love of music, had sat silently watching him. Now and then they glanced at one another.

And now Yansca was in trouble with this smart aleck who was thirteen years older than Yansca.

The rest happened quickly and expeditiously.

Members of the little community came to town; they saw Floto strolling up and down the street in his jaunty, carefree way, in his loud clothes, seemingly at ease with the world. When they went home they saw Yansca walking alone in the orchard; there would be traces of tears. The storm began to gather.

The night before the storm broke, Floto had spent a typical evening. He had eaten at the hotel, he had had quite a good time kidding the waitress, he had dropped into the radio store a minute, then he had gone to the ice-cream parlor to cool off, had passed a few jovial words with the new cashier, gone to the

telegraph office, where the operator also liked the ponies, to see if he had picked up any late returns. Then he had gone to the pool hall and had peeled off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and had had a good time for a couple of hours. Also he had made a dollar and a quarter on a nice, fast game of Kelly pool. Pretty good. He felt just mighty good toward the world, except, of course, that muddle about—but he'd rather not think of it.

Still feeling good, he started back to the hotel. That was when he suddenly had a new and different feeling —one not so good.

Between the Yehle dry-goods store and the bank is a back alley which divides the block into two parts, as is customary in this section of the country. The alley is just wide enough for a wagon to go along it, with a little space for another wagon, if it met one, to squeeze by. There are no lights in it, except as it is lit from the back rooms of the stores which extend to the alley, and at ten o'clock at nights the lights are few and far between. Almost dark it is.

It happened as he was passing this alley. Suddenly there was a patter of footsteps, the quick shuffle of feet, and Floto found a pair of arms thrown around him. Then more arms. A hand was clapped over his mouth. A car, which happened to be near, rolled up. Floto was pushed into a car, a gag was put in his mouth, a band over his eyes, and the car proceeded through the street looking like almost any other car. Behind it were half a dozen other cars which happened to be near. Now, after the first fluster, every-

thing was rather slow and deliberate. Outside the city limits the cars stopped, the headlights were turned off.

Floto had heard of what violent bands had done to persons they had turned against. Men, he knew, had been horsewhipped and beaten and left almost dead. But now there was no such frenzied violence. It was a job which must be done and done well.

They began to strip the clothes from him. At first, when arms had been thrown around him, he had fought and struggled, and on the way out in the car he had tried to hurl denunciations at them, but now abruptly he changed and began to plead.

"You don't have to do this, I'll leave town," he whined. "Honest to God, I will."

A bucket was brought up. A brush. Tar.

There was a quick, sharp, ripping sound. A knife had been drawn across a pillow of goose feathers. A hand dived into the slit, then other hands.

"Don't you nefer come back," said a slow, methodical voice. "Ve vill be easy on you dis time, but not some more."

It was over. Floto would have to scrape the tar and feathers off as best he could. When morning came he would have to go to some farm water tank, scrub off the rest, and then start on his sulking, dodging way. He would work his way to St. Louis; he would see Mr. Katzmeier, and then probably he would go back to spreading paint again.

One by one the faint, ghostly shapes began to go away, while the black, whining figure stood pulling at the feathers.

Chapter Thirteen

IT WAS a shock to Connie, the next day, when she heard what had happened to Floto. Floto run out of town! Tarred and feathered! For a moment she felt as if she couldn't breathe, and experienced a great physical lightness. She had heard the old saying that a person suddenly freed from some worry had the feeling of a millstone being lifted from the neck, and so it was now. An actual lightness, an exquisite sensation of floating.

She caught a picture of that last scene, as it was described to her, and saw again Floto as he struggled when the arms were thrown about him, heard his defiances. She saw the cars drawn up beside the road, saw the lights turned out, saw the men gather around him. But now his confidence was gone; she heard the rip of the feather pillow, heard the slow, spaced accent of the men as they warned him, heard Floto's whimpering. And then she could see him, as the cars rolled away, still whining, and pulling at the feathers. Her mind left this and flashed back across the years to the contrast of the first time she had met him, at the Pirates' Ball, when he was so bright and gay and attractive, so much the good fellow. She saw him again on the swaying Fifth Avenue bus, felt the clasp

of his hand, saw him again as they had sat before the sleeping fire.

As this panorama silently unrolled before her, the indignation which she had had for him for so long wore off, and in its place was one of indifference, and then came one of pity. He was a weakling; there were many such in the world—persons with the ennobling strand of character missing—unfortunates who believe the world is against them and who are never able to adjust themselves to life.

At first, immediately after it had happened, she was afraid that he had said some chance word which would get back to Junction City; but as the days passed she began to feel more secure. He had passed out of her life forever.

For a long time she had brooded upon the tragedy which had hovered over her, and now she began to realize that Floto had affected her only because of the difference in the point of view between herself and Walter. That was the core of it. Walter held to a stern, unyielding view of morality; he represented that great section of people who lay hard and fast rules and stick to them whatever the consequence, while Connie, on the other hand, believed that human beings come first and law and convention afterward. His narrowness and his willingness to go through with anything he believed in had once been a great and determining power in America, when our pioneers had suddenly found themselves thrust into a cruel, new environment. Their sternness, their willingness to face anything to the bitter end, had made them glorious conquerors.

But the world had changed, life had become vastly more complicated—the old dicta they had set up could no longer be followed. A new world was before them; they would have to meet it in a new way.

But what would Walter do? That was the question. Would he continue to follow his old iron beliefs, or would he see it all in a new way? Would his high idealism be so shocked that Connie would always be unclean to him?

The strained condition went on in the little home. Walter could not get over the fact that his wife had deceived him—it still continued to rise before him.

"I can't forgive her," he said to himself.

Two weeks had gone by—two slow, racking, nerve-tense weeks—while Connie merely lived at the house. She felt herself being pushed out farther and farther. Sometimes she would look across the table and see Walter's cold eyes upon her, still judging her in the light of his old beliefs. Sometimes his eyes would seem to soften, a gentleness would come into his tone, and then Mrs. Webb, like an evil spirit, would rise between them. Constantly Mrs. Webb returned to the subject; she brought it up in the conversation and would not let it die, and constantly she humored Walter in the belief that he had been badly mistreated and that few men would be so forgiving. Now and then Walter stopped to glance at his mother, as if trying to struggle out from under her influence, but all to no avail. Then one morning at breakfast it came up again.

"If Floto hadn't been invited to this house it would

never have happened," declared Mrs. Webb, as she poured the coffee. How like her this was, Connie thought, to bring it constantly into the conversation. "Don't play at the table, Allen. How many times has grandma told you that? That's what the back yard is for." She turned her protruding eyes upon Walter. Poor boy, she said, he did show the strain. But naturally he would, and when he was working so hard. Her voice softened, the tenderness of mother love came into it, the yearning, the constant solicitation which she had for him.

"You ought to have a rest today," she declared. "I'll tell you what let's do. We'll take the children out to the country and have a picnic." It would be fine, she said, sitting on the grass; the children would have a lovely romp, and then all could drive back in the cool of the evening.

She gave a half-motion of her head toward Connie.

"You'll have to get up the supper and get the children ready," she announced. "This is my Board-meeting afternoon. The poor people of China are in such a bad way. Walter, you come by the church and get me about the time the meeting is over, and then we'll start."

Walter looked across at Connie, and he caught something of what it meant to her to be so calmly ignored and to have her plans made for her. She was to be allowed to go along—after she had prepared the picnic supper and got the children ready, while his mother was worrying about what to do for the people of China.

"I have a fitting this afternoon," protested Connie.

Well, it would have to be put off till some other time, declared Mrs. Webb. She would have to consider the others. Walter needed the outdoors, and it would do the twins good, too.

"But I promised," said Connie.

"Call her up and tell her you can't come."

When breakfast was over, Walter rose to go, and there was the ceremony of kissing the twins, but while he stood there his mind was on Connie, and he saw the yearning in her face. Almost unconsciously he hesitated, but Mrs. Webb darted forward.

"Don't forget about the picnic," she called. "We'll have a wonderful time."

At the sidewalk Walter turned to wave a final farewell. Connie stood looking out the big double window, and something in her again caught his attention, something sad and forlorn and poignant.

"Good-by," he called and started down the street.

"Good-by, son," called Mrs. Webb.

But as Walter continued down the street the expression on Connie's face lingered in his mind. It was a look of infinite sadness, a hopeless yearning.

At the office Walter took out the key and opened the door, and picked up from the floor the letters which the postman had dropped through the slit. He placed them on his desk and began idly to turn through them, but his interest was gone. The old eagerness for work had deserted him. Now and then, during the morning, people dropped in to see him, abstracts and records must be looked after, and his official opinion, as repre-

senting the county, must be given. But he went through it mechanically. One of the visitors was Tom Uzzell. He had been around seeing some of the party leaders and things looked bright; if Walter worked it right he could step with the steppers. Of course, Uzzell explained, it would take time to get the ball rolling, but he believed he had found the ball. Uzzell's visits had always had the effect of exalting Walter, but now he remained inert. What difference did it make now if there was the chance in a few years that he might get in the congressional race?

At first Walter had been hurt and indignant. It was terrible that Connie, *his wife,* could do such a thing. It was monstrous. It shocked every ideal that he had ever known. There had been some small excuse that she could have done such a thing in Greenwich Village, but she should have told him about it. That was the unforgivable part—that he should think all these years that she was above reproach, and then to discover that she had lived with such a low person as Floto. But bit by bit this first feeling of outrage and bitterness began to wear off. Tiny doubts began to prick his conscience. After all, maybe life was bigger than such a narrow attitude, and also there came to him again what Connie had told him in the heated scene the night he had discovered Connie's duplicity —that he had killed Nettie. It had shocked him. It seemed so far and remote from him, at the moment, that it had made but little impression on him. Killed Nettie! It was absurd. She had killed herself—as a result of her sin. But now, from time to time, he

began to wonder if this were really true. After all, had he not been too severe in his dealings with Nettie?

Although Walter felt that he was in the right, life had lost its resiliency for him. At first it had seemed vaguely noble to go to the little sewing room and sleep on the couch, but now that he had time to think it over it was not quite so heroic. He was living under a strain; sometimes he hated to come home of an evening to meet Connie; the dinner seemed unending. Mrs. Webb chattered with what she thought was brightness, but it was pretty much the same—what the twins had done, how somebody had tried to get the best of her when she was marketing, and about the Board of Missions work. Rather dreary.

But today, after his mother had decided that they should go for a picnic supper, the scene lingered in his mind. How like other family matters it was—his mother was the one who had decided it. Connie was to be left out of it, almost. That is, Connie was to stay at home, get the children ready, and prepare the baskets while his mother saved the heathen.

It was not fair, Walter concluded, for Connie to do all that work. He would go home and have a talk with his mother and get her to help prepare the baskets, while Connie looked after the children. It would mean that his mother would have to give up her precious heathen, but it was better than for Connie to do all the work. He thought of the scene as he would arrive. His mother surprised to see him—was there anything wrong? Her eyes would stare, and then as she found that nothing was wrong, the lines of anxiety would

soften, her face would light up, she would have her son again. Then he would have to break the news. How would she take it?

"I'm going to do it," Walter declared to himself, and started out. He would walk. It would give him time to think it over on the way home. Walter started down the street, but it was not the friendly town that he had always known. People spoke to him, yes; he could see that they went out of the way to be recognized by him or to pass a pleasant word, but the town seemed dreary. As he walked along, lost in thought, he passed the rough establishment which constituted the marble-works, as it was called. In reality, it was the yard where the dressing and carving of the tombstones was done. Here all day long, straddled on a bench, a mason sat chipping away at the tombstones, carving names, dates, and sentiments. As Walter walked past he was separated from the yard, where the cutting was done, by a fence; inside this he heard a familiar voice. He paused a moment trying to think whose it was, and then he recognized it as that of Nettie's husband. As the mason and Nettie's husband stood talking, he was unseen by them. The mason had just finished a stone and Nettie's husband had come to see it before accepting it. Nettie's husband had enjoyed his period of martyrdom, and had, in his own estimation, become something of a town hero, and now was spending far more money than he could afford on the stone.

"I want to do the handsome thing by her," he had told the mason.

He had selected the words and now carved on the stone was

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
NETTIE

Nettie's husband stood looking at it, with a pipe in his mouth. Now and then slight puffs of smoke shot out from his lips.

"Yes, I think she'd like it," he declared. "Well," he sighed, "I suppose that's what we're all comin' to sometime." *Puff-puff* went the little blue circles of smoke.

The poignancy of the scene, the smoking, the thought that Nettie was dead, struck home to Walter. After all, maybe he had killed her with his stern, unyielding ideas. Nettie, poor Nettie! If he had it to do over again, he would pursue quite a different course. Life is a bitter struggle, from the cradle to the grave, and we should do all we can to make it easier for others instead of harder. Was he making it easier for Connie? the thought continued to trouble him. If Connie should leave him, or die, he would, in a short time, probably have the same sentimental attitude toward her that Nettie's husband now had toward Nettie. Why not do it while she was living? The thought walked at his side.

Mrs. Webb was just coming down the stairs when Walter reached the house, with her secretary's book under her arm, ready to save the suffering heathen. Immediately that she saw him her face filled with anxiety.

"Oh, Walter, is anything wrong? You surprised me so. What is it?"

There *was* something wrong, he explained; he had just come home to see her a moment, about the picnic. It would be too much work for Connie to do everything, and his mother should help. His mother's eyes stared at him unblinkingly.

"Why, Walter, she's got plenty of time! She's out with the children, now. It won't take long for her to get everything ready; besides, she expects to do it."

"Mother, I want you to get the supper and let Connie have a rest."

She couldn't do it, she said—it would make her miss Board meeting.

"I think you had better miss it, then."

Did Walter mean it?—especially after the way Connie had acted. Of course, it was all over now; nobody would find out; but they themselves knew it. "Oh, those poor darling babies, if they should ever find out," she sighed.

But there was no danger of that, Walter reminded her. Yes, that was probably true, Mrs. Webb admitted, but still—well, she had been low, just the same.

Walter heard the word "low" with a shock, the same kind of shock he had had when his mother had called Connie a "fallen woman." But now resentment rose.

"Why, Walter," she declared, putting her hand on his arm, her voice filled with emotion, "I don't think we ought to take her with us. It's really good of us to

let her stay here at all, and have the children. Why, lots of husbands wouldn't at all," she declared.

As she talked, Walter saw in her the same unreasoning, uncharitable attitude that he himself had had toward Connie. The trouble and suffering Walter had gone through had widened him, made him more generous in his attitude, and in him was a growing desire to forgive human frailty, but his mother was just as adamant as she had been at first. Her point of view was that of another generation; she was too old to change, and in this new period of adjustment she would be a menace to them.

Mrs. Webb was now clutching at his arm, staring at him.

Walter felt himself going through the scene with his mother as if it were not himself, and yet in some strange way it was. He heard himself declare again that Connie should not do all the work. He paused.

"Mother, I don't want you to go on the picnic at all. I want just Connie and the children today."

Walter saw tears come to her eyes. How could he say that to her, she asked, when she had done so much for him? Why, since he was born he had scarcely been out of her mind an hour . . . and now he could say that!

But Mrs. Webb was to have a bigger shock.

"Mother, Connie and I have got to get adjusted again and I think we should do it alone. I want you to go out to Uncle George's in California for a while."

Fresh tears came to her eyes; that her own son should want deliberately to send her away. . . . Now

she was going to have a headache. She wouldn't go on the picnic, she couldn't possibly go to Uncle George's . . . anyway, not now.

Walter turned to leave. Well, she would go to Uncle George's for a while, but she wouldn't stay long . . . the twins needed her. They were now just at the impressionable age.

Mrs. Webb stood in the sitting room, looking after him as he went down the front walk, and there was again the little sucking of her breath as she cried softly. There she stood, watching her son, dabbing at the tears, the muscles of her chin drawn up, trembling. Her son disappeared from sight. Her eyes fell upon the velocipede which one of the twins had left on the front porch. Slowly, one hand still dabbing at the tears, and giving the same sucking of her breath as she cried softly, she began to trundle the velocipede through the house to the kitchen porch.

It was a happy picnic supper indeed that the four of them had on the grassy slopes of Lovers' Leap. Walter carried the cushions from the car and put them on the ground, and Connie spread out the tablecloth and placed pickle and jelly jars on the corners to weight it down, while the twins had the time of their lives. Between the opening of the sardines and the spreading of the jelly they tracked down and dispatched three Indians and a bear. The only unfortunate side to it was that the hippopotamus got away.

Connie's heart beat with a happiness she had not known in months, as they sat there, not talking very

much, because sometimes words seem to clutter up things. The sun began to slip down in a radiant butterball to the west over Lovers' Leap.

"Let's watch it set," said Walter, and taking her hand helped her up.

From this high point of vantage they could see across the rich farming lands and over the endless acres of corn and wheat, while before them Junction City lay like a picture postcard.

They stood for some moments in silence.

"I'd forgotten how nice the sunsets are from here," said Walter.

"I like them, too," said Connie, suddenly shy.

A few moments later Walter turned upon her, his eyes beaming.

"I've been forgetting to tell you something," he said. "Good news. Tom Uzzell was in to see me today!"

He began to tell her about it, his hand on hers, the words tumbling out.

Connie heard some of his talk, just enough to follow it, because a happy heart can make a lot of noise.

"Boom!" shouted Albert at the top of his voice. Never again would that ol' hippopotamus escape.

THE END

NEW YORK
Publishers of BOOKS and of
HARPER'S MAGAZINE
—
Established 1817